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Buck Buckram; OR, BESS, THE FEMALE TRAPPER.

A TALE OF THE FAR SOUTH-WEST.

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"THE BOY TRAPPER," "NICK WHIFFLES'S PET,"
"THE WHITE INDIAN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DEED OF THE NIGHT.

"Don't you see the camp-fire yet, Buck?"
"No—'sh! not so loud!"

Two men, in trapper costume, were stealthily paddling an Indian canoe up one of the tributaries of the Colorado, in the far South-west.

Dark, heavy timber lined both shores, and the faint moon, obscured by the clouds drifting past its face, threw a strange, flitting light over the river, relieved by the inky wall of shadow, that reached out several yards from land.

Through this wild solitude, scarcely, if ever, visited by the hunter or trapper, these two men were making their way at midnight, one autumn, about twenty years ago.

The canoe was a small birchen one, such as the Comanches and Apaches are in the habit of using, and, as the two occupants softly pressed their long paddles beneath the surface, they scarcely made a ripple, and the trained ear of the American Indian would have noted their progress, only by that phantom-like figure gliding over the surface of the stream.

Buck Buckram, a tall, sinewy, iron-limbed trapper, sat in the prow, his thin neck craned forward, as he peered forward into the Egyptian darkness, in his effort to discover the little camp-fire, which he and his companion had left several hours before.

In the stern sat a heavy-framed hunter, Dick Havens, who dallied with his oar, and at the same time managed to impel it at quite a rapid rate over the surface of the creek. Both men had hunted and trapped at intervals during the last dozen years, and, in company with Dick Inglis, a younger and less experienced mountaineer than themselves, they had started from Santa Fe on a trapping expedition of their own.

Buckram, although gener-

ally starting from some of the New Mexican towns, had a home of his own in the upper part of the territory, to which, when not toiling for the necessities of life, he hastened. He had a beautiful half-breed wife, to whom he was devotedly attached, although he had no children.

The three men, after making a journey of several hundred miles on horseback, had turned their animals loose in a place where there was abundant grazing, and were not liable to be disturbed by Indians, and then had sought out their trapping grounds.

Finding abundant signs around them, they had located themselves in this place, and had been here about a week at the time we open our story.

They had met with unusually good success thus far, when they were annoyed by discovering that some animal visited their traps during the night, and destroyed whatever was caught in them.

To end this annoyance, Buck Buckram and Dick Havens made a nocturnal visit to their traps, in the hopes of detecting the intruder. After several hours' hunting and waiting, they caught sight of a huge mountain wolf, that no doubt was pleased at finding his meals prepared for him. A rifle-shot doubled him up like a jack-knife, and the two trappers set out on their return to camp.

And so on this still autumn night, the two hunters glided silently up the creek, eyes and ears on the alert for danger. Their communication was in those low whispers, which in the forest might have been taken for the rustling of the falling leaves.

Suddenly Buck Buckram held his paddle motionless, and with a faint "sh!" warned his comrade of the same. Halting thus, as silent and stationary as death itself, they detected through the hollow stillness of the night, a faint ripple, which an unexperienced ear would have

declared to be caused by a muffled oar, but which these two mountaineers knew to be made by some person or animal swimming in the water.

It was only the delicately trained ear that could have recognized the faint rustling; but a moment's listening satisfied them both, that whatever caused it was approaching them, and by an instinctive impulse, the light canoe was driven under the protecting undergrowth of the bank.

Here the two hunters sat as rigid as the inky tree-trunks along shore. The creek widening somewhat at this point, and the moon clearing, the clouds sweeping over its face, they had a quite distinct view of the center of the stream.

Nearer and nearer came that peculiar liquid sound, until peering through the interlacing vegetation, they detected the huge head and glowing eyeballs of a panther, swimming swiftly against the stream. As he came near the hiding-place of the hunters, his keen olfactory scented their presence, and he made a detour which carried him nearly against the opposite bank. He did not land, however, but continued on in the current, until he was speedily lost sight of in the gloom of the night, and the wonderfully acute ears of the hunters quickly lost all sound of the retreating animal.

A few minutes later, and the canoe was again descending the stream, like the shadowy figures in a vision of the night, and believing that all was right around them, the boat was impelled forward with greater swiftness than before.



"HE IS DEAD, AND THE APACHES HAVE SET HIM UP THAT WAY TO CHEAT US!"

Suddenly they rounded a sweeping bend in the stream, and caught the star-like glimmer of the camp-fire, which they had left several hours before. The reflection of the rays from the black surface of the stream, had a cheerful effect, like the glow of the settler's cabin to the belated traveler, and the hunters propelled the canoe, with long and powerful strokes, which sent it bounding like a swallow toward its destination.

When they had approached within a few hundred yards, they could see the figure of their friend, half-sitting and half-reclining upon the ground, in the free and easy posture of a wearied man, who is taking a quiet smoke after the labors of the day.

He did not look up nor stir his body. His face was toward them, but his head bent forward, as if he were lost in reverie, and the pipe, which a few moments before had rested between his teeth, had fallen out and lay upon the ground.

It was singular that he did not move nor show any consciousness of the approach of his friends, although the dip of the paddles was audible for quite a distance in the stillness of the night.

Suddenly a horrible fear thrilled through Buck Buckram, as with a tremendous sweep of his oar, he checked the boat, and in a hoarse whisper exclaimed:

"He is dead, and the Apaches have set him up that way to cheat us!"

CHAPTER II.

A GRAVE IN THE SOLITUDE.

BACK again into the gloom and darkness of the night was the canoe driven by the startled Buck Buckram, while he and his companion cowered down, expecting the crack of the death-dealing rifle, and the exulting shout of the Apaches.

But the same impressive silence rested upon wood and stream, as though no human being but themselves were in the solitude; and, when they had glided some distance, they quietly touched shore and stepped out.

"Are you sure you ain't mistook about that?" inquired Buck Buckram.

"No, sir," was the earnest reply, in an undertone. "It's one of their infarnal tricks. Poor Inglis has gone under, no mistake."

"Where are the reds then?"

"That was a little quaar. It looks as though, after they had sent him under, they war satisfied. Leastways, we'll soon find out."

Silently, cautiously, and stealthily the two moved through the woods in the direction of the desolate camp-fire. Quite a distance intervened, but the woods and undergrowth were so dense that the moonlight could not penetrate the gloom, and they could scarcely detect each other's presence as they moved along side by side, and within a few inches of each other.

When they were within a hundred yards or so of the smoldering camp-fire they separated, so as to approach the camp from different directions, and satisfy themselves whether any Indians were lurking in the vicinity or not and waiting to entrap them.

The reconnaissance occupied fully an hour, but the end of it was, the discovery that not an Apache was within striking distance. They had struck their blow and fled.

As they slowly approached the camp they could see their friend in the same stationary position, which was such a semblance of life itself, that there are few who would not have been deceived. The head drooped forward, hiding the face except the grizzly whiskers on the breast, while the hands hung listlessly by his side, as if he were in a quiet, dreamless sleep.

Satisfied that no danger threatened, the two came together. Buck Buckram being somewhat in advance, reached out his hand and placed it upon the shoulder of the dead trapper.

The instant he did so he displaced the skillfully arranged props, and the latter fell forward upon his face, as limp and lifeless as the hunting-shirt left upon his body.

An examination was now made, and it was found that Inglis had been shot from behind by an arrow, which had passed entirely through the body, taking the heart itself in its course. Life had been driven out instantly, with no more than a gasp upon the part of the unfortunate hunter.

By means of sticks, adroitly placed within his coat-sleeves, his body had been raised and supported in a sitting position, his coon-skin cap arranged on his head, and even the pipe he was smoking at the time the fatal blow was given, was placed again between his teeth.

The Apaches had displayed no little art in their attempts at deception. The undischarged rifle rested against his shoulder, just as the

watchful hunter holds his piece in a sort of idle embrace, where it can be seized at an instant's warning.

The Indians had evidently done this for the purpose of drawing the absent trappers into a snare; but, for some cause or other, they had departed before their return, and the latter thus made a narrow escape.

As there was still danger of the Apaches returning, the trappers withdrew beyond the circle of light thrown out by the camp-fire, and prepared to watch until morning, ready in case they did appear, to give them a welcome which would partly repay them for the diabolical crime they had committed.

It was a weary task, waiting and watching through all the solemn hours of the night; but it was maintained vigilantly until morning.

Twice during the night they caught the faint outlines of dark figures stealing along the shore of the creek, but they were gone before the eye could fix them, and the hunters maintained their positions without moving.

The gray light began breaking at last, and when the forest was lit up, there were no signs of their enemies in the neighborhood. Buckram and Havens came out from their hiding-place, and approached the body of their fallen companion.

Upon removing his cap it was found that he had been scalped, and the blood was dripping down his neck and face; but he was cold and motionless, and beyond the reach of all further suffering.

A painful duty was upon the hunters. They had not the means of digging a grave, and it would never do to leave him above ground, where the wild animals would speedily find and rend him.

"Is there no place where we could put him away in the rocks?" asked Havens, as they stood looking mournfully at the remains of their late companion.

"No," he replied, with a shake of his head, "that won't do; we should have to carry him too far."

"Poor Inglis! I wonder whether he had a family?" remarked Havens. "I never met him until last winter."

Buck Buckram shook his head.

"Nary a wife nor child. He came from Kentucky, and there was something about his leaving thar that I never understood, and he never liked to speak about. But Dick was a good feller," added the trapper, as he brushed a tear from his eye; "me and him have been in many a desperate scrimmage together, but it's all over now."

"And where shall we put him?"

"In the water."

The plan struck Havens favorably, and they made their preparations at once. The body was lifted up tenderly and carried to the water's edge, where it was placed in the canoe that awaited them. A huge stone was laid beside it, and then Buckram took the oar.

Apprehensive that there might be some lurking Apache in the vicinity, they paddled up the stream for fully a half mile until they reached a place where the sunlight never penetrated, and the dark waters were so deep that no bottom could be seen.

The stone was then secured around the trapper, and he was carefully lowered over the side. They watched him until he rapidly sunk out of sight, and then, without exchanging a word, they took up their paddles and swiftly left the sad scene.

CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNG CAPTIVE.

SINCE the trappers had lost one of their number from the Indians, it would be supposed that not only on account of their own safety, but for the gloomy associations connected with the place, they would have made haste to change their quarters.

Their inclination at first was to do so; but, as there was an abundance of beaver around them, they decided to remain through the trapping season. They sincerely mourned the fall of their brave comrade, but they were too accustomed to death even in its most revolting shape, to allow it to interfere with their daily avocations. As for Indians, they were everywhere, especially where white hunters or trappers were likely to congregate.

Careful watch was kept for the Apaches; but, for a time nothing was seen of them. The trappers daily visited their horses, which were concealed in a deep ravine about half a mile distant, and were gratified, as the days passed, to see that they were unvisited by their old enemies.

But matters could not always remain thus. The trappers had erected a rude sort of lodge, composed of bark, logs, and stone, and one afternoon, returning to this earlier than usual, their ears detected unmistakable evidence of its having been visited during their absence. The signs were slight, but they were convincing.

"I am afraid we shall have to dig out of this," said Buckram, after they had lit their pipes and discussed the matter, "it looks as though the varmints were laying some plan to nab us."

"Yas, and the only wonder is that they hain't come on us afore," replied Havens, who had more than once proposed that they should "pack up their traps" and leave.

"They've had something better to tend to, in the way of ha'r raising than to look arter us; but, I allow we'd better tramp without waiting much longer. So, if you'll go down and bring up the horses, I'll git the peltries ready, and this afternoon, we'll strike for the mountains."

It was now the dead of winter, although there was no snow upon the ground. The air was keen and sharp, and it was anything but pleasant for the trappers to leave their rough but comfortable home, and make their way over the bleak prairies and through the chilly woods to some new beaver-runs.

Havens acted upon the suggestion at once and started in quest of the horses, while Buck Buckram began bringing out the furs and packing them into the smallest possible compass, so that they could be loaded upon one of their horses, and transported without difficulty to their new home.

He had serious thoughts of caching them, but, under the circumstances, there was too much risk run, as it would be impossible to conceal the hiding-place from the eagle-eyed Apaches, when the latter had any reason to believe that such a stratagem had been resorted to.

So Buck Buckram brought out the beaver-skins, flat and outspread, and, as he flung them admiringly upon the ground, he could but stop and admire them for a few moments.

"Them ar' what I call the rig'lar style," he soliloquized, "sich as a man don't cotch every time he goes a beaver-huntin', and them will bring a nice little pile of money down at Santa Fe or Taos, or wherever I take 'em."

He rubbed his hand over them as though he was smoothing the back of some favorite animal, and added, as he proceeded to tie them up:

"When I take them down to Santa Fe and turn them into good yaller gold, won't somebody up among the mountains smile? I rather reckon she will!"

Soliloquizing and chatting with himself, he continued his work until they were secured in convenient bundles. By this time a couple of hours had passed, and he began to look for the reappearance of Dick Havens. He turned his eyes continually in that direction, and, as the time passed slowly by, a feeling of anxiety began creeping over him—a feeling which was startled into real alarm, when he heard from the direction he had taken the faint report of a gun.

Without one thought of the loss of his peltries, he instantly caught up his rifle and started toward his friend. In order to make the journey without loss of time, he found, after traveling a mile or so, at a peculiarly romantic and rocky portion of the route, that he was close to the creek, over which he and his comrade had passed so many times in their canoe.

He was advancing in this manner when his experienced ear caught the ripple of a paddle, and he drew back, just at the time to escape the observation of two Indians, who were seated in a canoe, rapidly paddling down-stream, and who passed almost at his very feet.

Now, there was nothing particularly remarkable in the sight of these two Apaches, as they were frequently seen in this neighborhood; but, what arrested the attention of Buck Buckram, was the sight of a captive—nothing less than a girl scarcely a dozen years of age who was seated in the stern, with a finely-worked Apache shawl gathered about her.

Her long black hair streaming over her shoulders might have been taken for that of an Indian; but the clear white skin was unmistakably that of a Caucasian, and her features were almost Grecian in their perfect symmetry, while her figure gave evidence of ripening into one of extraordinary beauty of proportion.

The Apaches and Comanches of the Southwest are noted for the number of captives which they frequently take, and, at ordinary times, Buck Buckram would not have been surprised at the sight before his eyes. But there was something in the appearance of this girl, which

arrested his attention as it had never been arrested before.

He stared intently at the beautiful face, and the impression ran through him that he had seen it somewhere before; but think as he might, he could not remember where, although the longer he looked, the more convinced was he that it was not the first time he had encountered her.

And then he asked himself whether he should not fire his gun and kill one of the Apaches, and, attacking the other, rescue the girl. But he was too old a hunter not to understand the peril both to himself and the captive, but especially the latter.

There was no doubt but he would slay one of them, but ere he could reload, the second could brain the girl, and then the fight would be between him and the red-skin.

Besides that, another consideration restrained his arm. As he carefully scrutinized her face, he fancied that the placid expression upon it meant that if she was a captive, she was a willing one, and in slaying her captors, he would be slaying her best friends.

And while these thoughts were drifting through his mind the canoe passed around a bend out of sight, and he suddenly recollected that he had set out to reach his comrade, who probably was in great peril.

CHAPTER IV.

THE APACHE HORSE-THIEVES.

WHEN Dick Havens left the trappers' camp, and made haste toward the grazing-place of the horses, it was with little thought of personal danger.

He had passed the greater part of the distance, when the near report of a rifle somewhat alarmed him, and caused a sudden checking of his steps. Besides the proximity of the report, he distinctly caught the whizz of a bullet, as it passed within three inches of his cheek.

This was pretty conclusive evidence that whoever fired the gun had made him the target, and the furious trapper whirled about on his heel, and looked for the hiding-place of the assassin.

From a small bush, about two hundred yards distant, he saw a faint wreath of smoke curling upward. Hesitating only a moment, he dashed in that direction at the top of his speed, muttering:

"I'll teach you better manners nor to try that game on Dick Havens, you all-fired coward."

Not for an instant while running did he take his eye off the bush; and as he sped rapidly over the ground, he drew his knife from his girdle, to be ready for the desperate hand-to-hand encounter with the red-skin, who had had the temerity to make the attempt upon his life.

And yet when he reached the clump of bushes, and bounded over them, "red-hot" for the contest, not a man or sign of one was to be seen.

For a few minutes he stared about in bewildered amazement, and then looked up over his head and then down to the ground, as though expecting to find some trace of him in those directions; and then collecting his wits, he stooped down and carefully scrutinized the ground in quest of a "sign."

The wonderfully skilled eye of the mountaineer was not to be deceived, and on the rocky, flinty ground, he detected the shadowy imprint of a moccasin, confirmation of the tale that had been told by the smoke-wreath that followed the spiteful crack of the rifle.

"But hang it, where has he gone?" he muttered, still staring stupidly around him.

He then attempted to follow the trail but this was impossible even though the flight of the Indian had been greatly hurried. The ground was very hard and flinty, and after a yard or so the trail was entirely lost. Whoever the treacherous red-skin was, he had made good his escape, and the trapper was now powerless to do anything.

Still muttering vengeance, he examined his rifle, and turned his steps in quest of his horse, occasionally glancing over his shoulder, to make sure that he was not followed, and furtively scrutinizing each rock and shrub behind which it looked probable that a red-skin might conceal himself.

There was still considerable distance to pass, and the fact that he had been fired at made him exceedingly cautious in his movements.

Suddenly, from some cause or other, he glanced to the left, and he was certain he saw the tufted head of an Indian peering from behind a bush, almost similar to the one from which the well-nigh fatal shot had been fired.

Without waiting, the trapper raised his gun, and taking a quick, but sure aim, fired. Then

he paused long enough to reload, and dashed forward to make sure of his victim.

Upon reaching the bush, there lay an Indian, sure enough, stretched out cold and lifeless, although his position was precisely the same as before the hunter fired his gun.

Here again another mysterious and inexplorable thing was noted. Scrutinizing everything with a hunter's eye, the trapper saw that, although he had shot an Indian, yet it was a dead one. The Apache had been slain by a bullet fired several hours at least before his own.

"B'ars and beavers!" muttered Havens, "that 'ere is a little the quarist thing yet. The first time I ever fought dead Injins!"

At any other time, he would endeavor to investigate the matter, but just now he was too sensible of the danger constantly impending over him; and, leaving the dead Indian where he lay, he hastened after his horses.

A half-hour later he reached the spot where he had visited them the preceding day, but was somewhat alarmed at seeing nothing of them. He was not long in learning that the red-skins had also been here. He saw a number of moccasin tracks where the ground was of a more yielding character, and discovered where the two horses had been ridden out of the inclosure by their savage captors.

The signs showed that it was but a short time since the Indians had left, and the trapper took the trail at once, following it with an assiduity that a mile further on brought him in sight of the thieves.

He found that two Apaches had stolen the animals; and, after riding a short distance, had dismounted, slain both, and were enjoying a dinner upon the choicest portions of each.

"I'll give you chaps a little pepper to take with that," muttered Havens exultingly, as he began cautiously creeping to a position from which he might gain a good view of the red-skins.

"Yer'll find out that 'ere don't taste as well as you're countin' on," he added, as he secured the coveted position.

As there were two savages to encounter, the trapper endeavored to maneuver so as to bring the two red-skins in range, in order that one bullet might finish both.

But he failed, as they constantly changed their position, and he finally gave over the attempt, and concluded to shoot one, and then take the other in whatever manner the savage elected.

He carefully sighted his rifle over the ground, and it required but a moment to make sure of his aim. The next moment he pulled the trigger, and, with a shriek, one of the Apaches threw up his arms and expired.

It struck Havens as he rapidly began reloading his piece that it sounded strange when he fired it, and he speedily saw the reason. At the very instant of discharging it some one else did the same, and the result was seen in the second Indian lying dead upon the ground.

As mystery seemed the order of the hour, Havens would not have made an attempt to identify his friend, had he not appeared on the ground, in the shape of Buck Buckram, who, springing from behind an adjacent rock, exclaimed:

"Run quick, Dick, yonder is a whole pack of 'em!"

At the same instant, he set the example by speeding down the ravine with the swiftness of the wind.

CHAPTER V.

A RUN AND A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

MEN who are accustomed to lead the exposed and adventurous life of the trappers of the West, are pretty certain to possess great fleetness of foot, and extraordinary powers of endurance.

Buck Buckram and Dick Havens had been in many a "tight place," and had learned to use all the power given them by nature, with great skill. The warning word of the former was the signal for both to turn about and speed away, as fast as their legs could carry them.

Buck was slightly in advance, and took a course down the ravine, and almost in an opposite direction from the place where he left his furs and peltries. He had two reasons for taking this course, the first of which was that it offered the better prospect of escape, and the second that it drew their pursuers away from their property, which was too valuable to be given up unresistingly.

At the moment of starting, Havens saw nothing of the Indians, whose presence had been announced by his companion; but they had run scarce a hundred yards when a series of whoops and yells emphasized the warning, and told the

hunters that their safety now lay in getting over the ground as fast as possible.

While the earth was of a character to prevent anything like the speed of which both pursuer and pursued were capable, yet it perhaps could not have been more favorable to escape, as the hills, ravines, streams, and rocks gave them every opportunity to conceal themselves, and to resort to those artifices, by which a chase of this kind is so frequently decided.

The first great necessity was to get so far beyond the Apaches as to gain an opportunity for something of the sort, as nothing could be done when the intervening distance was so slight.

Fully sensible of this, the trappers bent every energy and bounded over the ground with the velocity of a race-horse, while the Apaches, confident of capturing the two, forbore to fire their guns, but kept up their hooting and shouting, as though they would frighten them into giving over the chase at once.

"Dick, let's spread!" called out Buckram to his companion, when they had sped along for a short distance.

The two accordingly "spread" on the instant—that is, they separated, believing that there was a better chance of success in doing this, than in remaining together.

This, of necessity, compelled the red-skins also to divide their forces, although there still remained enough in each party to "settle the task" of a dozen such trappers.

There was very little, if any, difference in the fleetness of the two hunters, and the moment they separated, they began rapidly drawing away from their enemies, several of whom discharged their guns, while all redoubled their exertions.

A fortunate turn made the fortune of Buck Buckram. All at once he found himself upon the margin of a small tributary of the river. It was quite a creek, with high, precipitous sides, and apparently with considerable depth of water.

At the time he discerned this obstacle, he was now within a rod or two of the edge; and, without stopping to "look before he leaped," he called up all the strength of which he was master, and, with one mighty bound, just reached the other shore. He cleared the space by scarcely a hand's breadth, and without pausing to look back, hastened on until he was buried in the wood.

But Buckram had run but a short distance when he saw that he was safe, and he turned about to see whether he could be of any assistance to his companion.

The latter had not been quite so fortunate. When he "spread," he diverged to the left, taking a direction which he judged would give him the woods, and would leave the matter to be simply a dead trial of speed.

But the same creek which interposed across the path of Buck Buckram, and secured his safety also, after several tortuous windings, laid itself upon the margin of a broad and deep stream.

Its width was too great for him to leap, and he therefore turned quickly to the left and sped along the shore, his eye running rapidly ahead, seeking some place over which he could jump.

Instead of narrowing, the stream broadened, until the fugitive began to fear that he was in a trap, for the Indians had him in plain sight, and were yelping like madmen at the easy prospect of capturing him.

In a sudden thrill of alarm he whirled about to retrace his steps, but had gone scarcely a dozen yards when he perceived his mistake, and turned back again.

By this dubious proceeding, he lost several minutes—precious time, and the Apaches were fearfully close. Havens saw that he had committed such an error, that the only possible means of securing his safety was by leaping the creek.

Still onward he hurried, until at last he struck a spot where it looked as if he might accomplish the feat. Turning off somewhat to the side, so as to gain momentum, he made the run, and throwing all his strength in the effort, attempted the feat.

He narrowly missed—striking the shore within a few inches, but still in water which was about ten feet in depth. He sunk to the bottom, but immediately came to the surface and began swimming to a point a few rods down, where it looked easy for him to ascend the bank.

He had taken less than a dozen strokes, when several brawny Apaches appeared upon the bank, and one of them made the attempt either to leap across, so as to confront him upon the opposite side, or else he purposely sprung into the water to capture him, before he came out.

He struck with a loud splash, within an arm's length of Havens, and the next moment the two grappled.

The Apache was an excellent swimmer, and was possessed of great strength and activity; but, in each respect, the trapper exceeded him, and he speedily got the best of him. Each drew his knife and struck fiercely at the other, but Havens, by a skillful trick, sent it spinning out of his opponent's hand.

He now had him at his mercy, and, as may be expected, showed him none. The Apache yelled and shouted to his companions on shore, but they were fearful that if they fired, they would slay their own man.

Seeing that it was going against him, one of those on shore sprung into the water, and began swimming out to his assistance.

Before he could reach him the spiteful crack of a rifle upon the other bank broke the stillness, and, as the Apache threw up his arms and sunk beneath the water, Buck Buckram called to his friend:

"Come, Dick, there's no time to wait!"

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT ADVENTURE.

BUCK BUCKRAM reached down and caught his comrade by the collar, and drew him upon the land. Then, amid the hootings, and yelpings and firing of the Apaches, the two men plunged into the wood, with greater speed than ever.

As it may be supposed, the Indians lost no time in following; but they were thrown at great disadvantage by being compelled to cross the creek, which necessitated considerable delay upon their part.

By this time, too, it was growing dark; and, as the two men sped through the woods, the protecting shadows gathered about them, until they felt they were safe from all pursuit.

Their adventure with the Apaches had led them a long ways out of their course; but they understood their bearings so well, that they took the most direct route toward the spot where they had left their peltries.

As their animals had been slain by the Indians, they were compelled to take the part of beasts of burden themselves until they could find means of securing others; but they were so accustomed to vicissitude and discomfort, that they looked upon the additional labor with little dread.

It was fully midnight when they reached the point from which they started. Their peltries were found uninjured, but the howling of several wolves near at hand, showed that they would have remained safe but for a short time longer.

Without any delay, they were slung over their shoulders, and carried to the edge of the creek, where their canoe was waiting. When piled into the small boat, they sunk it to its very gunwales, and it required great care and caution to avoid having the whole thing swamped.

Shortly after they started, the full moon came up above the edge of the forest, and soon lit up the stream so brilliantly, that the danger of traveling was increased tenfold.

Having dealt so roughly with the Apaches, there was every reason to believe that they would leave no means untried to revenge themselves, and would be upon the ground, as soon after the trappers themselves, as they could make the journey.

"Keep close to the shore!" whispered Buck Buckram to his companion, who was using the paddle.

"That's what I'm trying to do, but these confounded limbs are switching me in the eyes all the time."

"Look out for 'em then."

"That's what I'm trying to do also, but I'm expectin' every minute, that one of 'em will catch the boat and upset us all."

There was danger of this catastrophe, and Buck Buckram sitting in the prow, made it his special business to ward it off. As the boat glided noiselessly along, he reached out his hands, and gently pushed the limbs aside; and, occasionally when there was danger of shying too close or too far away, he corrected the course of the canoe, without any difficulty or jarring.

The belt of shadow which stretched along shore, gradually narrowed, as the moon ascended the heavens; and, as the surface of the creek became clear and bright, the hunters advanced more slowly and carefully, for there was evidence of the Indians all around them. More than once they heard the apparent cries of birds, but which they knew to be signals of the red-

skins, and some of them were so close at hand, that they started, believing that they were discovered.

Suddenly Buck Buckram raised his hand as a signal to his companion to "back water," while at the same time, he caught the overhanging limb of a tree, and checked the forward motion of the canoe so abruptly, the peltries came near going overboard.

"Sh! sign," he whispered.

At the same instant, they saw by the reflection upon the water directly ahead, that they were in close proximity to a camp-fire of their enemies, which was built so close to the river, that it looked impossible for them to pass it, without discovery and another fight.

They were more fortunate thus far than they could hope to be in another scrimmage with their enemies, and it was the part of prudence therefore that they should avoid the Apaches as much as possible.

They debated together a few minutes, and then it was decided that Buck Buckram should creep ashore and take a careful survey of the camp, and see whether it would be possible to attempt to pass it in their boat.

Buck Buckram appreciated the danger of this too well to incur any risk that was avoidable. When he had crawled on his hands and knees a couple of hundred yards, he reached a position from which he gained a clear view of the camp.

He was somewhat surprised to find the very two Indians, whom he had seen during the day in the canoe, with the little girl. The savages had halted to cook their supper, the principal preparation of which seemed to fall to the lot of the little girl.

From the trapper's concealment, he had a good opportunity to scrutinize all three, and when the child's face was turned toward him, with the light of the camp-fire full upon it, the conviction at once flashed over him that he had seen that same countenance years before, when it belonged to the face of an infant. He racked his memory for a long time, but in vain. He had been through many rough adventures, and his life was an eventful one indeed. Somewhere, in far different surroundings, he was certain he had looked upon those features, and there were some hearts in the broad Southwest who mourned for her loss.

Buck Buckram lay on his face for half an hour, scrutinizing the girl, as she moved about with the lightness and grace of a fairy, and then he gave over the attempt.

But, as he began cautiously retrograding, he made the resolve not to leave the country until he took the girl with him.

Fortune favored the chivalrous trapper; for when he had nearly reached the canoe, he heard one of the Indians order the girl, in a rough voice, to go to the creek and bring some water.

She caught up a tin vessel, which her captors had evidently stolen from some hunter or settler, and started to obey her master, taking the direction which led her to the very spot where Dick Havens awaited the return of his companion.

She reached it, but a few steps behind Buckram, who, as she came near, rose to his feet and motioned to her to keep still.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Bess," was the reply, in a soft voice.

"Wal, Bess, keep quiet now, and we'll take good care of you!"

With that he picked her up, and gently placing her in the canoe, signaled to the other hunter to move on.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BROKEN THREAD.

FOR a few minutes the canoe glided silently, no one daring to break the stillness by speaking in a whisper. Every moment they expected the yell of the Apaches at the discovery of the flight of the young captive, and every second was used by Havens in propelling the frail vessel down-stream.

The dangerous point was where they came opposite the camp-fire, and all lowered their heads, while the trapper allowed the boat to drift with the stream, not venturing even to trust to his own skill in using the paddle.

Providence favored them, and the perilous point was safely passed, and coming to the sitting position, Havens used the paddle with greater vigor than ever. Still, when the girl made as if to speak, he motioned to her to keep quiet, as there was risk incurred in any noise.

They had passed several hundred yards when a singular yell was heard, the meaning of which puzzled both the hunters. But the girl impulsively exclaimed:

"It is Velasquies calling me."

"What is your name?" asked Buck Buckram, feeling that he might relax his vigilance somewhat, although he still kept to work with his paddle.

"My name is Bess," she replied.

"Bess what?"

"Bess—nothing more; I haven't any other name," she answered, speaking with good accent, and yet not entirely perfect.

"Who is your father?" pursued Buck, who felt a powerful interest in this waif of a child, providentially thrown upon his hands.

"I—don't—know," was the reply, as the girl seemed lost in some deep reverie.

"Neither one of the Apaches be such, I'm sure."

"Oh, no! the Indian is not, but the other may be."

"Who is the other?"

"Velasquies."

"Isn't he an Injin?"

"No; he is part Mexican and part Apache."

"A half-breed," suggested Havens, who was listening with a good deal of interest to the conversation.

"Yes; that's it. Maybe he is my father."

"No, he isn't," said Buck Buckram; "such a looking scamp as he is never had such a child. Besides, too, there isn't any Injin blood in your veins. But don't you remember anything of other people?"

"No," she replied, in the same softly hesitating tone.

"Is Velasquies the first person you can call to mind?"

"Yes; he has always been with me."

"No, he hasn't either. Think hard now. How is it you speak English so well?"

"I learned it from him."

"Not all of it, although he speaks it well."

"Do you know him?" she asked, looking up eagerly in his face.

"Yes; I have met him."

"Is he a bad man?"

"Just about as bad as ever I set eyes on. He's ugly enough to kill his own mother."

"He sometimes beats me. That is the reason I run away from him. You won't beat me, will you?"

"May God smite me if I do!" returned the trapper, as he brushed a tear from his eye. "In the first place, that scamp of Velasquies hasn't any right to you. It's quarr I didn't know him when I see'd him in the canoe, but he was so painted and daubed up that I never spected but what he was a red-skin. I say he hain't got any right to you, and while I'm alive, he shall never have you. But I want you to think hard, and see whether you can't think of something away back afore you seen Velasquies."

"Sometimes," replied Bess, in that curious hesitating manner, "I can remember a house with big gardens, and brothers and sisters, and a fine lady that looked in my face and smiled—and then it seems it grew dark, and it all goes again."

"That's it—that's it," repeated Buck, excitedly. "Now try hard, and tell me what else you can think of."

"I can't think of anything else."

"Are you sure?"

"I have often tried, but I can't."

"How long ago does that seem?"

"Oh! a long time—a hundred years."

The hunters smiled at the child's earnestness, and Buck added, in his kindest tones:

"A great while to you, in course, but a small time to us. Now, I want to ask you another question—"

"Hark! there is Velasquies calling to me again," she interrupted, looking affrightedly behind her. "Oh! how angry he is, and how he will beat me if he gets me again!"

"Don't be scart; he isn't going to get you again. Now, Bess, look into my face. I'm near 'nough to you, and the moon shines bright enough for you to see me plain."

Buck leaned forward, so that his face was close to that of the little child.

"Look into my face, and tell me whether you have seen me or any one that looks like me before."

The little waif did as requested, and gazed long and earnestly upon the bronzed features of the hunter; but she shook her head.

"No; I have never seen you before."

"Yes, you have, but you don't remember, and the deuce of it is, I remember that I've set eyes on you afore, and I can't tell when or where it was."

"That's quarr," remarked Havens. "Can't you think hard, too, and tell it?"

"Shoot me! it's no use; I've been tryin', ever

since to-day, when I see'd her, and could get time to think. It'll come to me, I s'pose, some time, when I don't care about it."

"Hark! there goes that yelp ag'in."

"Let him yelp, and that's all the good it'll do him."

And all the time, the little canoe, with its precious freight, was moving swiftly down the lonely stream, in the quiet moonlight.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN THE RIVER.

BUCK BUCKRAM worked the paddle with the unceasing persistency and the untiring steadiness of a steam-engine. As the night advanced, little Bess became weary and her head drooped.

Havens disposed the velvety skins, so as to make her couch as soft and luxurious as that of eider down could have been. She was gently covered with another fur, and she slept sweetly and dreamlessly.

As she lay with her pale, beautiful face upturned and the silver moonlight resting upon it, while the scarred, hardy trappers kept watch over her, the scene was a strange and touching one.

Buck Buckram knew that the Apaches would make every effort to recapture the escaping child. Velasquies unquestionably had some powerful motive in spiriting away this child from its parents, as he had certainly done.

Buck Buckram, with the chivalry that always distinguished him, resolved never to give over his efforts until this child so strangely thrown upon his hands should be returned to her parents.

And all the time, as he plied his paddle, his mind was wandering back in its search for the time and place where he had first seen this fairy-like face.

And there was something in the voice, too, that was like the sound of familiar music heard long, long ago, and which vibrated through the aisles of memory with a wild power.

But hour after hour passed, and the trapper heaved a deep sigh, and gave over the task. He had met with no better success than before.

Several times that wild, demoniac yell of Velasquies came faintly borne to them upon the night wind—sounding more like the wail of some wild animal than anything else, but it gave them no concern, and they paid scarcely any heed to it.

When it was past midnight the two hunters exchanged places, and Buck Buckram stretched himself out as much as possible, so as to gain a few hours' rest.

Havens plied the oar with the same steady persevering skill as his companion. As the moon was overhead, and there was scarcely any shadow thrown out by the river banks, he kept near the middle of the current.

More from custom than from any anxiety, his sharp eyes flitted from shore to shore in quest of danger.

He had a singularly prudential custom when approaching a bend in a river, of going close to the shore, and passing around very slowly, so that at the first sight of peril, he had a chance of withdrawing before precipitating himself beyond retreat into danger.

The wisdom of this course was soon manifest, when in rounding a bend in the stream, he caught sight of three large canoes coming upstream, and only a few hundred yards away.

One powerful sweep of his paddle, and his own boat was forced far back, under the shadow of overhanging trees, while he softly stirred Buck Buckram, who was breathing rather heavily.

The experienced hunter seemed to understand, as if by intuition, what it meant, and slightly shifting his position, his slumber continued as quietly as the innocent Bess near him.

A moment later, the canoes, one after the other, shot around the bend, and passed within a dozen yards of the motionless boat, with its equally motionless occupants.

When they were beyond sight or hearing, the tiny vessel once more glided out in the moonlight and resumed her way, Havens plying the oar with the same untiring regularity as before.

Finally it began to grow light in the east, and then the hunter slackened his efforts somewhat and looked about him, as though searching for the precise spot where he should land.

Before him rose a ridge of mountains, ascending beyond the forest line, their peaks looking like rugged masses of white clouds resting in the horizon.

The country at their base was of the wildest character, crossed and intersected by streams and caverns, and just the place in which a party

of hunters could secrete themselves from their hereditary enemies.

Havens turned his canoe toward land, and immediately Buck Buckram awoke. Raising his head, he looked hastily about him, and then recognizing his whereabouts, he arose to the sitting position, and remarked:

"You've rowed purty well, Dick, to get here so soon. See any sign on the way?"

"Nothin' worth speakin' of."

"Shoot me! how the little gal sleeps!" exclaimed Buckram, looking down in the face of Bess.

"Ain't she purty?"

"She ain't anything else."

Buck surveyed her features for a few moments with the same intense interest, and then looking toward his companion, said:

"Do you know, I'd give every peltry I own, and gun and all, when we're in the middle of this red-skin country, if I could call to mind the place where I've seen that 'ere face."

"It's powerful qu'ar that you can't. I'm sure I could, if I was in your place."

"And I'm powerful sure you couldn't. Haven't I hammered my head till it has rung like a bell, and all for no good? Hang it! I sha'n't try any more!" exclaimed the trapper, as he impatiently turned his head away.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"Going to do with her? I'm going to take her down home, and put her with the old woman and with my children, and then I'm never going to rest till I find out her friends for her."

"The sooner you do that the better, for this ain't the country for such a younker. But we hain't got any animals."

"We'll cache our peltries till we come back ag'in, and start home with her. When she gets tired, we can carry her."

"A very good idea, but the fust thing we've got to do, is to give the younker something to eat."

"Just let her be till she comes to, as she seems to be doing purty well."

But Bess at this juncture opened her eyes, and so that suggestion was not acted upon.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PERIL.

FOR a few minutes, little Bess failed to realize her situation; but the kindly looks and words of the trappers soon reassured her, and she greeted them pleasantly.

"Oh! I'm so glad I am with you, and I'm so hungry."

"I'm jist going to send Dick there to get your breakfast."

"And I'm jist on the point of going," replied the trapper, with a laugh, as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and moved away.

At the particular point where the party landed, there was no shrubbery, and Buck Buckram noticed with some uneasiness that their boat, and even themselves, could be distinctly seen by any one in passing up or down the river.

He pulled the boat clear up the bank, where there was no danger of its being swept away by the action of the current, and then began unloading the peltries.

"As soon as he comes back," he remarked, to the little girl beside him, who was nimbly assisting him at the work, "we'll get your breakfast."

"How long will he be gone?"

"Not long. Are you getting hungry?" he asked, with a smile.

"I ain't getting so, I am so."

"So am I; and when he brings his deer or antelope back, won't we have a good breakfast?"

"Do you know how to cook?"

"Somewhat."

"Velasquies always made me do it, and I can make a very nice dinner for anybody."

"I've no doubt of it; you're too little to help me much at this, so s'pose you rest yourself."

"Oh! I ain't tired," she protested, as she continued nimbly at work, for a time longer; but by and by her hands wearied, and she gave over the task.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, "did you hear that gun?"

"That's your breakfast," was the reply; "s'pose you go down the bank and watch for Dick."

She slipped merrily away, while Buck continued to work at his peltries. It required but a short time for him to unload them, but after that, he was obliged to carry them a considerable distance, in order to reach a point where something like concealment was afforded.

This was accomplished after considerable labor, and he then turned about, and picking up

his canoe, carried that Indian fashion over his head to the same place.

He had hardly set it down when Bess came dashing toward him, almost breathless with excitement.

"Wal, what's up now? Have you see'd Dick? It's time he war comin' back."

"I've seen Velasquies!" was the startling reply.

"What?" demanded Buck, in amazement.

"That is I think I have. There were two men coming down the river in a canoe, and one of them looked like Velasquies."

"Which side of the river did they stop on?"

"The other side, and—"

"Hello! there goes Dick's gun again," interrupted Buck, with an expression of uneasiness upon his face. "It can't be that them varmints have followed us all the way byar, and yet shoot me! if it doesn't look that way."

The trapper questioned little Bess closely, but gained little of anything additional. She had been playing on the bank, and watching for signs of her coming breakfast, when she suddenly caught sight of a canoe but a short distance away, coming down the stream, and heading for the other side of the river.

She knew enough to conceal herself at once, and she watched them for several minutes. She saw them skirt along the shore for some distance, when they halted and both disembarked, leaving their boat behind them.

But the girl had seen enough thoroughly to alarm her, and she hastened to her friend with the tidings.

Buck, after carefully weighing the matter over, concluded that there was nothing alarming in the news, and to him there was every indication that the two persons whom she had seen were Indians, who knew nothing of his whereabouts.

He was very glad, however, that he had removed the canoe and peltries to a point where they were not likely to be seen by any one in passing up or down the river.

"You go back to where you war," said he to Bess, "and keep watch of that canoe, and take good care they don't see you, and as soon as Dick comes back we'll let you know."

The girl leaped away, but had taken but a step or two, when the hunter was seen returning, bearing upon his shoulders the choicest portion of an antelope.

Of course this ended her expedition, as nothing now was to be thought of except the meal, for which all were longing.

"We'll take it up yar, out of the way," said Dick, walking on by them, without pausing, except to greet the little girl.

This was only a prudential proceeding, in consonance with the habits of both the hunters. The two walked along, passing in and out among the rocks, until they reached a secluded chasm, where no human eye could see them at a dozen feet distant.

On the way thither Buck had gathered quite a quantity of dry sticks, and in a few minutes, a fire was roaring and crackling right merrily.

The most delicate steaks of the young antelope were carefully held and turned before the fire, and the most delicate and select of all was first cooked and given to Bess, who was as hungry as hungry could be.

The trappers then prepared their own, and while it was being devoured, Buck remarked inquiringly:

"Didn't I hear your gun—"

He suddenly paused, for a look from his companion warned him not to finish the question, as he had no wish to make the answer just then.

Buck took the hint, and Bess was unsuspecting.

When the meal was concluded, the two sauntered off carelessly, until they were beyond the hearing of the little girl, and then halted.

"What is it?" inquired Buck.

"There's no mistake about it; we've been followed by a party of Apaches!"

CHAPTER X.

THE CACHE.

THIS was indeed alarming information, and set at naught all the plans of the trappers as to continuing the season in the mountains. Had it not been for the little waif on their hands, and whose welfare was not second to their own, they would have rather welcomed anything that gave a prospect of a scrimmage with their hereditary enemies; but as it was, there was but one recourse for them, and that was to get out of the neighborhood as rapidly as possible with their charge.

As they had no horses, it was impossible to

take their peltries with them, and it was decided, therefore, to *cache* them, with a strong probability that they would be stolen by the Apaches, before the hunters could return to claim them.

Dick Havens, in answer to the inquiry of his companion, said that his first shot had slain the antelope, and his second, a murderous Apache, who sprang upon him from behind a rock, with the evident belief that he had an easy thing of it.

This occurrence aroused the hunter's suspicions that something was wrong, and he made a reconnaissance of the vicinity, and discovered fully thirty Indians encamped less than quarter of a mile away. Among them, he recognized several of the very savages, who had given him such a hot pursuit on the preceding day.

He was almost positive also that he saw the half-breed Velasques and an Indian join the party. This conflicted somewhat with the story of Bess, which placed these gentry upon the opposite side of the stream, but still both statements could easily be correct. The river or creek, as it might be called, was very narrow, and could readily be crossed in a few moments, and the whole party might have crossed and recrossed several times.

It was perfectly characteristic of the hunter that he should not say a word about this danger, until after the meal was finished. Now that they were ready to meet it, he made a clean breast of the whole thing.

"Afore we *cache* the furs there's another thing we've got to 'tend to," said Buck Buckram, speaking in low, serious tones.

His companion looked inquiringly at him.

"What's that?"

"The way things 'pears now, thar's likely to be hot times afore we git out o' yar. If the reds should come on us whar we be now, we'd go under, thar's sartin, and both our ha'r would be lifted afore we could sneeze, so we must look out for a place whar we can retreat."

"Will it take us both?"

"No; you keep yer eyes on the Injins, and I'll hunt up a good place, and one at the same time whar we can *cache* our peltries."

The suggestion was acted upon at once, and, while Havens went off to scrutinize the movements of the Apaches, Buck Buckram took little Bess by the hand, and went in quest of the hiding-place.

The girl chatted gayly by his side, all unconscious of what a terrible catastrophe was about to break upon them.

In such a wild, mountainous region they could not search long without discovering some suitable retreat. In less than half an hour, the hunter stumbled upon the very spot.

A cavern some twenty feet in depth, the entrance of barely sufficient width to admit his body; the walls massive and dark, effectually shutting out any approach except by the one entrance; with a small stream trickling through the rear portion. Such was the cavern which Buck Buckram selected as their retreat until they could leave safely.

Here, upon full reflection, the hunter concluded to make his *cache*. Leaving Bess in the cave he started out for his peltries. On his way he heard a low whistle, which he recognized as that of his companion. He replied to it in the same cautious manner, and a few minutes later the two were together.

"See anything of 'em?" inquired Buck, in a whisper.

"They're in the same place."

"Will we have time?"

"Guess so."

They set to work at once. It was no small task to transport the peltries to this place, as the distance was considerable, and the way very rough and uneven.

When the sun reached the meridian, their labor was not half finished.

Then, too, Bess complained of hunger, and, as might be expected, both of them gave over the work to attend to her wants.

And when this was completed, it was deemed proper that Havens should make another reconnaissance to satisfy himself as to the imminence of the danger.

Upon reaching the spot where he had last seen the Apaches, they were found to be absent; and as great caution was necessary in his movements, over an hour was consumed before he discovered their whereabouts.

To his surprise he found that the entire party had crossed the river and were upon the opposite side. He did not conclude it worth while to follow them, although he was not a little puzzled to understand the meaning of the movements.

When he returned to his friends the afternoon was half gone, and there still remained a good deal of work to do.

But the two set about it with a will, and toiled unceasingly until dusk, by which time every fur was stowed away in the cavern.

"Now, ef they'll only stay away till mornin' there'll be some chance of givin' 'em the slip," remarked Buck, as he sat down, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"What do you think of doing?" inquired his companion, who always deferred to his judgment in the hour of peril.

"We'll take a short rest, fur I'm dog-goned tired, and then, ef the way be cl'ar, we'll dig out."

"By the canoe?"

"That's the way I'd like to try, as we hain't got any hosses, but the thing is, are we goin' to git the chance?"

"We might carry it up-stream a ways, till we git the chance to put it in the water."

"You see thar's a bright moon, and it's going to be a risky business."

"That's what we allers calc'lates on."

"But we've got to use extra caution," said Buck, glancing toward Bess, "fur we've got her to 'tend to."

"In course—"

"Hark! there the skunks come!"

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY.

THE words were still in Buck Buckram's mouth, when the sharp crack of several rifles was heard, followed by a chorus of wild yells, which told them that the fearful peril had burst upon them with appalling suddenness.

But they were not totally unprepared. A large stone had been rolled near the mouth of the cavern, to serve as a sort of door, and the trappers immediately sprang forward, and shifted this around, so as to offer an impassable barrier to a forcible entrance.

It was not done a moment too soon; for the next moment, it seemed that the place was swarming and alive with red-skins. Their yells were heard incessantly, and they fired their guns in such a reckless manner that it was fully as dangerous to those upon the outside as those within.

Still a number of their bullets entered and flattened themselves against the walls of the cavern.

"Keep out of the way, Bess!" called out Buck Buckram, in a voice, which sounded far above the din and tumult; and, fearful that the child might be struck by some of the passing bullets, he ran up to her, and seizing her like an infant, carried her to a dark corner, where there was no possibility of her being struck.

"Now, don't you stir away till I let you!" he commanded, as he set her softly down. "If you do, you'll surely be killed."

There was no danger of the child disobeying his orders, for she was old enough to comprehend fully the peril, and she crouched down, like a frightened animal, scarcely daring to breathe.

Buck hastened back to the mouth of the cavern to be ready for any emergency.

"Hang the varmints!" he muttered, as the tumult partly ceased, "they come sooner than we thought."

"Give 'em blazes!" said Dick, who was now thoroughly aroused; "we mought as well first as last."

As he spoke, he fired his gun for the third time, at a tufted head, which flitted by a crevice of the opening, and the agonized shriek of the victim told with how fatal a result.

And without waiting to reload, he struck out with his knife, with lightning quickness, at a bare limb which presented itself within reach.

It was instantly withdrawn, but not until a frightful wound had been inflicted, and the owner of the limb crippled for life.

Buck Buckram was not behind his companion, in the fierceness and promptness of his acts. Wherever and whenever the opportunity, he fired and struck with the same furious ferocity, and with equally telling results.

This desultory fighting continued for some fifteen or twenty minutes, and then, as it was plain that the Apaches were getting the worst of it, they withdrew far enough away to be beyond the immediate danger of the rage of the trappers at bay.

The latter watched for an opportunity, with the vigilance of lynxes. It was plain that this was going to be a fight of the most desperate character, and the hunters understood the necessity of gaining every possible advantage of their treacherous foes at the very beginning of

the encounter, so as to weaken them for the final contest.

When the Indians drew off, the stillness that immediately succeeded was oppressive from the contrast.

A murky, sulphurous odor filled the cavern, making respiration difficult, and rendering the situation of those within anything but pleasant.

But it was not their danger which gave them concern, but the future, and the near future, too.

It was in the power of the Indians to bring them to terms, and at no distant day, at that. The thoughtfulness of Buck Buckram had provided them with enough antelope to last them for a day or so, but no more.

The little stream trickling through the rear of the cavern gave them all the water they could need, but no person has yet been found who can exist upon that substance alone.

It was plain that the trappers had committed a blunder, which bid fair to be fatal. Had they let the peltries go, they could have been far beyond the reach of the Apaches by this time. Even had they fled the moment the furs were placed within the cavern, they had a good prospect of getting off clear, as the night was so close at hand.

Both the trappers felt this blunder keenly, but neither blamed the other, for each was equally at fault. Had it been otherwise, no word or even thought would have indicated it.

However, it was now too late for regrets, and these mountaineers were not the men to sit down and idly bewail what was done past recall.

They were the ones who were prepared to face the hard, stern reality of the matter, and they did it.

Both were thinking of the same thing, and as they looked in each other's faces, they instinctively read the fact.

"Do you think we can do it?" asked Havens.

"She's the difficulty," was the reply, in a low tone, as he lightly jerked his hand toward the corner where Bess lay asleep upon a pile of furs.

"It looks as though we shall have to give her up."

Buck shook his head.

"Not till we've got to do it to save her life, and there may be a chance of getting her out of this."

"S'pose we can't?"

"I'll do it then, and take the rest of my life to gittin' her out of thar clutches, and I'll do it!" he added, striking his fist upon his knee; "and when I do do it, you won't catch me in any such dog-goned of a scrape as this again; that you may be sartin about."

"When will be the time to try it?"

"Not afore midnight, ef we kin do it then. This moon plays the deuce with us."

"Can we wait till to-morrow night?"

"Ef it looks best."

"All right; and between now and then, we'll kill off all the varmints we kin."

This was unanimously agreed to.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE CAVE.

THE scheme which had entered the heads of the two trappers at the same moment was a desperate one.

As their safety in the cavern was but a temporary one, they thought of pulling aside the stone, and making a rush, to pass the swarming Apaches upon the outside.

This would necessitate furious and sanguinary fighting, and there was great risk of being cut down without accomplishing it; but men who lead such a life as theirs are always accustomed to face the most appalling danger; and if they had known to a certainty that the chance of life and death were even, they would not have held back a moment.

But there were several considerations which induced delay. So long as they held out, there was the remote prospect of the Apaches growing weary of the siege, and raising it, by a voluntary withdrawal, and the almost certain possibility that they could succeed in weakening the power of those on the outside, by shooting quite a number, who would be sure to expose themselves during the succeeding day and night.

Furthermore, to carry out this plan would necessitate a surrender of little Bess into the hands of her barbaric captors, with the inevitable brutal treatment, and perhaps death; and the trappers were not yet prepared to resign her to such a fate.

Still further, behind all this lingered the slightest probability that it might be possible to make terms with the Apaches—not properly

with the red-skins themselves; but if, as there was every reason to suspect, Velasquies was among the party, it was not impossible, although it was improbable, that he might be induced to make terms other than those of "unconditional surrender."

However, this at the most, was a very dubious hope to depend upon. The great point, after all, was for them to think over some plan—if possible, some other besides the one which made it necessary to dash out among the rampant Apaches, and fight their way through.

Still Bess slept as sweetly and soundly as if she were lying in the arms of her mother, who, no doubt, was grieving her heart, and shedding many a bitter tear at her long absence.

"Let her be," was the moody remark of Buck. "She's better off sleeping than waking."

As the night grew on, the darkness within the cavern deepened until it was all absolute blackness, no one being able to distinguish the outlines of the others' forms.

The faint silvery light of the moon's rays could be dimly discerned on the outside, but it could not penetrate within.

The trappers talked in low tones, the hollow cave giving a singular resounding or echoing power to their tones, and making them sound loud.

Even the gentle respiration of Bess had a strange, loud character, such as would be made by a large animal when at rest.

Buck was fearful that if she awoke she would ask for something to eat, and he was reluctant to kindle a fire, especially during the night. There being no draft to carry away the smoke and vapor, it would be sure to accumulate and increase their discomfort.

At the same time the light would reveal their presence to the red miscreants without, and compel the greater caution to avoid being targets for the rifles; and yet, in the face of all this danger, if Bess should wake up and ask them to cook her some of the antelope meat, neither of the trappers would have hesitated to do so.

The boulder which the trappers had found convenient, and had made answer the purpose of a door, was of such size, that when placed at the entrance, it was impossible for the smallest child to enter or pass out.

Moving with great difficulty, the resistance of one man from within was sufficient to keep out any living animal or any body of men. The danger, therefore, was as what was to be the end of the siege.

Buck Buckram was sitting with his back against the boulder, when he felt it sway gently back and forth. It was only for an instant, when it stopped.

Thinking it only accidental, he did not rise to his feet; but, when it was repeated a few minutes later, he uttered a slight "sh!" and came silently to the standing position.

Being in utter darkness himself, he was invisible; but the bright moonlight upon the outside gave him a distinct view, as far as his vision was not limited by the solid wall.

For a few moments he could see nothing to account for this slight swaying motion, although from the first he did not doubt that the Apaches were at the bottom of it.

A careful scrutiny of all that could be seen satisfied him that there was either one or more red-skins behind it, seeking to gain enough momentum to force it inward, and thus open the way for the whole horde to swarm in.

He debated with himself a few moments whether to allow them to do this and thus precipitate the crisis, which must come sooner or later, or whether to nip it "in the bud."

A few seconds' deliberation, and he decided upon the latter course.

Cautiously forcing his head as far forward as he dared, he finally gained a view of the head and shoulders of a brawny Apache, in a crouching posture, with both hands pressed against the rock.

There were one or two others, but they were too far removed to be seen by the trappers.

Buck Buckram sprang lightly back again, and muffled the lock of his rifle, as he raised the hammer. His "Sh!" was repeated just loud enough for his companion's ear, and then he stealthily took his position again, where he could gain a view of the Apache.

The latter had slightly shifted his place, and changed his attitude so that he was resting upon one knee, but enough of his person was still visible to answer the purpose of Buck.

Bringing his gun up beside him, he found that the opening was so narrow, and irregular, that he could not deflect the piece enough to bring it to bear upon his enemy.

This was a sore disappointment, as neither of them had pistols, having lost their revolvers which they generally carried some time before.

He saw, however, that if the rock could be made to incline inward a few inches, it would be sufficient. Once more he sprang back, and, in a few seconds explained the situation to his comrade.

A moment later, at a signal from Buckram, the boulder was suddenly drawn inward six inches or so; and, at the same instant, the gun of the former was discharged. Immediately several Apaches sprang to their feet and hastened away.

But one didn't.

CHAPTER XXI. THE AIR HOLE.

"HARK!"

The exclamation was uttered by Dick Havens about an hour after the occurrence narrated in the last chapter, and it was caused not by the sound of anything, but by the *absence of sound!*

Both listened, but all was as still as the grave.

"I hear nothin'," said Dick Havens, after a few minutes spent in listening.

"That's just the trouble!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't it sound a little too still in here?"

"You don't mean?—No; I hear her breathing!" replied the hunter, in some excitement.

"Not that—not that," was the somewhat impatient reply, "but that's something else that I'd like to hear and don't."

"Shoot me! can it be?"

The hunter understood him now. They no longer heard the *trickling of the water!*

Buck hastened to the rear of the cavern, and in a few minutes returned.

"Is it so?" inquired Havens.

"Yes; the varmints have shut it off."

The two uttered rather forcible exclamations, as they realized the rather alarming fact that the Apaches had cut off their supply of water, by turning aside the tiny stream, which had hitherto forced its way through the rear of the cave.

A careful examination was now made, and it was found not quite so bad as it might have been; for the water had collected to a considerable extent, and formed a pool containing a gallon or so on the other side of the cavern.

Both the hunters felt somewhat thirsty, but neither would touch it until Bess had awaked and had her fill.

It was now beyond midnight, and shortly after the discovery we have mentioned, the little girl awoke, and asked, with a bewildered air, where she was.

A few words reassured her, and then she asked for water. She was conducted through the darkness to the little pool, where she knelt down and slaked her thirst.

The trappers were fearful that she would ask for something to eat, but, after a few artless inquiries, she lay down upon the furs again, and went to sleep.

Now and then indications of the Apaches were heard, and unremitting watch was kept to prevent any sudden surprise upon their part—a favorite mode of attack among the Indians of the West.

As there was a probability that there would be a great demand upon their time and endurance, Buck Buckram lay down for a few hours' rest, while his companion kept watch.

The hours wore away without further disturbance, and Buck opened his eyes just as the misty light of morning was stealing into the cave.

"Anything?" was the comprehensive inquiry.

"Nothin'," was the equally definite reply.

"Good—so far."

Even with the full glare of the day, the boulder so nearly closed the mouth of the cave, that it was gloomy and dark within, so that the inmates could barely discern each other's forms.

Shortly after the awaking of Buck, Bess did the same. She chattered awhile, and then, as might be expected, she asked for something to eat.

"Have you any of the antelope left?" she inquired.

"Plenty, and we shall soon cook you some."

But at this point, an unthought-of difficulty presented itself. There was no material within the cave with which to build a fire. So that matter was settled.

The trapper now resorted to the harmless deception of allowing the girl to eat the meat raw, trusting that in the darkness she would not observe its condition.

So, after some preliminary flourish, he cut off a tender piece and handed it to her.

"We hain't found time to cook it very well," said he, by way of apology; "but that won't make any difference, in course, to you."

Little Bess ate a mouthful or two, when she discovered the artifice, and laughed at it. She, however, had been taught in the hard school of adversity and experience, and when it was explained to her, she accepted the "situation" with a good-nature that both surprised and delighted the trappers.

"I ain't very hungry now and won't eat any more, but when I do get hungry I will eat it just like you do."

"You're a number one little beaver!" exclaimed Buck, enthusiastically, "and ef the life of this yar good-fur-nothin' dog is spared another year, you'll be out of danger of Velasquies and the red-skins."

"I want to go live with you," said she, nestling her soft cheek against the scarred face of the old hunter.

"So you shall—so you shall—and I'll keep you thar till I find yer own home, and then I'll give yer to yer folks again."

"But," said she, "how are you going to get out of here?"

"That's a hard question, I allow, but I hope the Lord will tell us a way."

"So he will, and I know what it is."

"You do, eh? Wal, what is it?"

"You two, maybe, can get out, but I can't; and you can't take me with you. So, do you go without taking me."

"And leave you behind?"

"Yes; Velasquies and the Indians will kill you if they can get a chance, but they won't hurt me."

"But what will become of you?"

"They will think you stole me away, and Velasquies will take me again. He says when I grow up, I am to be his wife—"

"The scamp! he has got a wife and a whole kit of young ones."

"He doesn't care for that. Then when he gets me, you can follow and watch, and I will look for you and *sometime*," she said, with the most childish faith and eagerness, "the chance will come for us; and then I will go and live with you till I find where father and mother and my sisters are. *That is the plan.*"

"It may be, but we won't talk about it now!" replied Buck Buckram, wiping a tear from his eye.

CHAPTER XIV. SMOKING OUT.

LITTLE BESS had revealed the true plan of action, and unpleasant as it was, Buck Buckram could not but admit it to himself.

But he was resolved to defer it until the last moment, and then adopt it simply because there was nothing else he could do, and it gave him the hope of saving both himself and his precious charge.

The day had scarcely begun, when the sound of voices was heard on the outside, and it instantly occurred to Buck Buckram that now was the time to hold his parley, if he wished to do so.

He acted upon the thought at once. Not being blessed with such a thing as a pocket handkerchief, he tore a piece from his hunting-shirt, and fastening it to the end of his ramrod, thrust it out of the mouth of the cavern.

For a time it seemed to attract no attention, but after awhile it was evident that it was seen and understood. Some one approached close to the cave and asked:

"What you want in there?"

Buck Buckram turned to his companion and whispered.

"That's Velasquies, I know his voice."

Then turning his head so as to face the opening, he replied by asking the question:

"We want to know what you want."

"We want you," was the unequivocal answer.

"What for?"

"You are our enemies; you are trapping in our territory, you have killed a number of our warriors, you have run away with the daughter of Velasquies."

"We have captured a little girl that Velasquies stole from her parents, and we war on our way to take her home, when you have followed us to this cave."

"Them warriors we have slain, have been sent under in the squar' style of fightin', and we wouldn't 've growled ef you'd 've served us in the same way."

"Then you're ready to surrender, be you?" eagerly asked Velasquies.

"Not 'zactly; ef you think you can take us, why don't you do it?"

"We kin afford to wait."

"I s'pose you know me—Buck Buckram?"

"An' I s'pose you know me—Velasquies?"

"Yas; you're the sneakin' coward that got his head broke in Santa Fe fur strikin' an old woman, and that run off with a little gal that you're no right to."

A fearful oath was the reply to this, and the half-breed added:

"That's none of your business, Buck Buckram. That gal is mine, and I'm goin' to have her. Don't she want to come to me?"

"Ef she does, I ain't a-goin' to let her, even ef she cries for it," replied Buck, who thought this deception justifiable under the circumstances.

"You'd better do't, fur how you gwine to help it, when we've got a hundred brave Apaches to make you?"

"S'pose I give up the gal," said Buck, "what do you purpose to do with us?"

"Can't say 'zactly—just as the Apaches says; very likely they'll let yer go, and not trouble yer any more."

"Yas; very likely," was the sneering comment of Havens, who was listening to the conversation; "how you'd like to git hold of us, wouldn't you! How you'd like to raise our ha'r, to pay fur your own skunks that we've wiped out, wouldn't you?"

"What did you stick out that rag fur?" was the next question of the half-breed, and a very sensible one, too.

"I wanted to see whether you'll give us anything like a fair show, fur ef you will, we'll fight the whole shebang of you."

"You can come out and do what you please; but we're bound to have that gal you've got in thar."

"S'pose we won't give her up?"

"You'll have to do't; and ef you ain't ready just now, we kin wait—that's all."

There was a coolness in the manner of Velasquies which showed that he fully appreciated the situation, and could well afford to wait until the ripe fruit fell into their own hands.

Nothing had been accomplished by the flag of truce; and from what took place, one might well question what the object of the trappers was in asking.

They had learned to a certainty that Velasquies was among their assailants, and they had in a manner paved the way for the return of little Bess to the temporary keeping of her former brutal master.

The girl had heard and recognized the voice of the half-breed, and trembled with fear at the sound; but, as we have shown in another place, her perceptions were more than ordinary, and she was only confirmed in her belief in the wisdom of the plan she had mentioned some time before.

As there remained nothing to do, Buck drew in his flag of truce, and the armistice was at an end.

The two trappers retreated to a point safely removed beyond the shots of their foes, and earnestly discussed the prospect.

Havens favored drawing the stone aside, and rushing out at once among the Indians. The place was growing terribly irksome to him, and he was ready to commit almost any deed that afforded the remotest chance of his getting out.

Buck Buckram strenuously opposed it.

"Let us wait till the dead of night," said he; "that's our time, and then when they don't think about it, and half of 'em be awake, we'll sail in and make the fur fly."

"That's jist the matter; they will be thinkin' 'bout it more then than ef we do it now."

"Then we'll have a better chance to run even ef the moon is purty bright, than ef we went out in broad daylight."

This was a strong argument, but Havens was not satisfied by any means. He felt that every hour weakened them, and added strength to their enemies. He saw, too, that a surrender of little Bess, how much they might deplore it, was unavoidable.

"Why wait?" he asked, after a few minutes' silence. "Don't yer know the way out thar is so narrow like, that all of them varmints can't get at us at once?"

"I know that, but they can shoot."

"So kin we," was the dogged response.

"We've got to go over the heads of 'em, too, to git cl'ar of the whole confounded rabble."

"I think a right powerful charge among 'em would do the business—"

"Take my advice, Dick, and wait—"

"Hello!"

At that instant a heavy volume of smoke

rolled into the cavern, and the crackling of fire was heard at the same time.

"Shoot me! ef they ain't goin' to smoke us out!"

CHAPTER XV.

A TERRIBLE EVENT.

THERE was no doubt upon that point, for scarcely had the words been uttered, when the red tongues of the flames could be seen creeping up over the face of the boulder.

The heavy, suffocating smoke seemed to be drawn inward by some attraction, and in a few minutes it was hardly possible to breathe.

"My God! what's to be done?" exclaimed Havens, growing bewildered for a moment.

"Keep cool!" was the reply, "and keep your face close to the bottom. I wonder how the little gal is gittin' along?"

Buck called her, and she came to him.

"What are they trying to do?" she innocently asked.

"They want to smoke us out. How can you stand it?"

"It hurts my eyes more than my throat," she replied, rubbing them with both hands.

"Go back as far as you can, and keep yer face purty close to the surface, and you'll stand it as long as we can."

In the meantime, the heavy, damp smoke continued to roll into the mouth of the cave, when it seemed to become heavy and overpowering.

"I can't stand this much longer," exclaimed Havens, who was on his knees and gasping.

"It's gettin' bad; I've swallowed about all I can stand."

"Let's make a rush; we may as well do it now as to wait till we're both killed."

Buck Buckram still hesitated, but the increasing density of the smoke quickly decided him. He was on the point of giving the word, when an exclamation from Bess arrested his notice.

"Come here, quick! Here's a place where you can breathe."

They hastily scrambled toward the voice.

"Right down there," she said, "where the water comes in."

The half-strangled trappers placed their faces close to the damp pebbles. They found that a volume of cold air was rushing in, and they inhaled it with all the delight of the parched traveler who comes upon the icy spring. It was relief, it was happiness, it was bliss!

But while they were happy, little Bess was becoming miserable. A cough reminded them that she was in danger of strangling, and both instantaneously drew their heads away.

She hastily replaced her mouth to the vacated position, and regained her normal self.

It was now found impossible for all three to inhale the fresh air at once. They tried it several times, but as often as they did one failed.

They therefore could do nothing but resort to taking turns. By this means, they could manage to get along.

"How much longer before the varmints will think they have finished us?" sullenly inquired Havens.

"Ef they could see the smoke in yar, they'd think we war done for, sure."

"Ef they'd only hurry up and rush in, thar'd be some inducement to wait."

"Maybe they'll git tired and go away," remarked Bess, who, curiously enough, seemed to take upon herself the office of consoler.

"It seems to me," said Havens, as he withdrew his face, "that thar's a chance of gittin' a smaller breath of fresh air near the mouth of the cave."

"You'll be right in the smoke."

"Not exactly, fur I noticed that it came in over the tops of the rocks more than it did near the bottom."

"Be very careful, for the varmints will be expectin' that, and they'll wipe you out afore you know it."

"Don't fear for me," was the reply, and Havens hastened forward in a crouching position.

"How are you making out?" asked Buck Buckram, a few minutes later, speaking in a cautious undertone.

"Purty well; you stay thar, and I kin hold out here."

All this time, the Apaches were whooping and yelling on the outside. They were sure they had caught their prey at last, and would soon smoke them out.

They kept piling on the brush and wood, and danced about like children, frantic with delight. Among the chorus of demoniac voices, it was easy to distinguish that of Velasquies.

"We've got yer at last! we've got yer at last! How do yer like it? Why don't yer come out?"

Still they took good care to keep out of the

way of the rifles of those within. They had had a taste of the stuff of which they were made, and they wished no more of it.

All the time that Havens was inhaling his scanty breath, he was watching with an eagle eye for a sight of some of his tormentors. He was especially anxious to gain a chance at the half-breed; but he, like all the others, carefully avoided obliging him.

Buck Buckram and little Bess were doing as well as they could wish where they were. The former felt that he was not using his comrade right in remaining there all the time; so he quickly ran to his side, and said he would change places with him.

The latter yielded, and for a time all went well. Buck found he had great difficulty in breathing, but still he managed to succeed.

He remained here about fifteen minutes, when Havens reappeared at his side.

"We'll change; you go back and try it awhile."

"Be careful, Dick," he added, as he moved away again.

Once more did Buck inhale the free, cool air, which revived his whole system, while the face of Bess was close to his own.

Suddenly there was the crack of a rifle.

"Dick has gained a shot," he thought to himself. Then he called out:

"Did you hit him?"

There was no reply and a vague, dreadful fear thrilled through him. He repeated his call, but still there was no reply.

Buck ran across the intervening space. One glance and he saw his friend stretched flat upon his back.

He knelt down and looked in his face. It was enough.

Dick Havens had been shot dead by the Apaches!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RUSH FOR LIFE.

BUCK BUCKRAM had witnessed sudden death in many and the most revolting forms. Even that of Inglis was terrible; but the sudden striking down of Dick Havens startled him, as he had never been startled before.

He ran his hands over his face, and felt for the beating of his heart, but he was stone dead. He had been shot through the brain, while gasping for the breath of life, by the half-breed Velasquies, who had been watching for the opportunity.

As yet Bess knew nothing of the frightful tragedy which had been enacted so near her, and Buck determined to keep it from her. He remained by his dead comrade until the thickly-gathering smoke drove him away, when he hastened back to where his young friend was awaiting him.

"Why doesn't Dick come?" she innocently asked.

"I wanted him to do so, but he won't."

"Is he getting along well where he is?"

"He can't do any better."

They were silent awhile and then Buck said: "I begin to think, Bess, that your idea is the right one, after all."

"I knew you would," she replied, kissing him affectionately.

"We shall have to leave yer behind, and Velasquies will git you ag'in and beat you bad."

"No worse than he always has been, and then you know, you're going to come and take me away ag'in."

"That's so; if I git out of this infarnal place alive."

"You'll do it easy enough!" was the confident reply.

"Then you'll have to stay hyar by this air hole till they rush in and get you."

"I will. I shan't try to run away. When are you going away?"

"I thought I'd wait till night, but Dick wanted me to go right off. What do you think about it?"

"I don't see any use of waiting, either."

"I guess I'll go, then."

"I'll kiss you both good-by, then," said she.

This was a delicate matter to the grizzled old trapper. He saw, of course, that if she persisted in saluting both, it would be impossible for him to keep the secret of Dick Havens' death from her. He, therefore, tried to discover this natural manner of parting.

"No, Bess, we won't either of us kiss yer."

"Why not?" she asked, in a respectful tone.

"I'll tell you why; it looks too much as though we didn't expect to see you ag'in."

"Maybe you won't, either."

"We won't think so, anyway. I'll jist say

good-by to you, and then we'll make a rush out of the cavern."

"I would rather not," she said, after a moment's silence; "it doesn't seem right to me."

"Yes, it does, little one," added the trapper, with a sort of forced gayety in his manner. "It's a notion of mine, and you'll do it to please me now; won't you?"

She assented, although it was plain to Buck that she was by no means satisfied with the arrangement.

It having been decided that the rush for life should be made without further delay, Buck lost no time in making his preparations.

He had formed a plan of his own, which was to fasten his rifle and that of his comrade to his back, so that his movements might not be impeded; and then pulling aside the boulder, he would catch up the body, and holding it before him as a shield, make a rush among the terrible Apaches.

He had found, in placing the boulder at the entrance to the cavern, that by inserting two goodly-sized stones, one on each side of it, that it could be secured against any pressure from the outside.

These wedges removed, and a child could force it inward.

Cautioning Bess to remain where she was, he hurried to where the inanimate form of the trapper lay.

The latter held his rifle tightly grasped, and it was with some difficulty he loosened it from his rigid fingers. He then removed his knife and placed it in his own girdle.

He now began securing the guns to his person, but the smoke was so heavy that he was forced to hurry to the rear of the cave to secure a few breaths of air.

"What are you doing with both guns?" inquired Bess, as he began securing them over his shoulder.

"I am going to carry both."

"Isn't Dick going with you?"

"Yes; he will go out, too."

"Why doesn't he take his own gun?"

"I can do it better."

Buck Buckram now returned to the mouth of the cave to learn how matters were upon the outside.

The fire seemed to be somewhat lower, and the Apaches had evidently grown weary of their furious dancing and shouting.

While the trapper was cautiously reconnoitering, Velasques approached close to the mouth, and called out:

"Hello, in thar! How did you like my shot?"

"So it was you, eh? Very well, I'll settle with you some day, if the good Lord only spares my life."

The half-breed called out several times, but received no response, and Buck heard him say, evidently to himself:

"I guess they're about used up; we mought as well rush in for them, ef the stone will only give way. I'm afeard the gal won't be able to stand it."

Buck Buckram cautiously drew out the wedge. Then he turned about and called out, in a cautious undertone:

"Good-by, Bess!"

"Good-by, both of you!"

The next instant the boulder fell inward, and a mass of burning brush and coal lay before it.

Buck paused but a second, and then catching up the body of his comrade, he held him partly over his shoulder and before him. With one leap he cleared the glowing embers, and with a wild yell dashed down through the ravine, among the treacherous Apaches.

CHAPTER XVII.

RUNNING FOR LIFE.

WHEN Buck Buckram burst out of the cave, with the trapper held over him as a sort of shield, his coming was entirely unexpected upon the part of the Apaches.

They had seen the boulder fall inward, but they supposed it to be accidental, and were not prepared for any such demonstration.

Besides the singular appearance of the trapper, with his two guns strapped upon his back, and the limp form of his huge comrade, mostly covering him, was not understood for a moment.

All this operated greatly in favor of Buck, who improved his advantage to the utmost. As he dashed out, he found several Apaches in his way, but he struck them like a thunderbolt, and ran on and leaped with might and main.

In a few moments he had cleared those immediately surrounding him at his exit, and was

in an open space, where he had full opportunity to stretch and exercise his limbs.

He ran about a hundred yards, with the body slung over his shoulder, when, having no further use for it, he dropped it and turned his whole energies toward escaping by flight.

Shouts, yells and screeches followed this daring exploit upon the part of the trapper, and the bullets whistled all about him.

Some of the leaden missiles hummed and buzzed close to his ears, and more than one pierced his clothes, but, providentially, he was unharmed.

But it was almost a miracle that he was not struck, and Buck had no wish to tempt his good fortune a moment longer than he was compelled.

The second he reached a place where it was feasible, he dodged behind the intervening rocks, and as much as possible, kept them between himself and his enemies, so as to disconcert their aim.

The Apaches were not content merely to fire their guns, but a half-dozen of the fleetest runners started instantly in pursuit.

As Buckram leaped and ran along, he realized the wisdom of his own words with Dick Havens, when the latter was so anxious to make the attempt to escape at once.

If he only had the sheltering darkness to protect him, he could throw these bloodhounds off the trail in a very short time; but, as it was near the middle of the day, he could only hope to do it by superior fleetness and skill in dodging.

The trapper was remarkably swift on foot; and, as soon as he gained a respectable distance he settled down into a dead run, tearing forward with all the speed of which he was capable.

For some distance the way was rough and uneven, and he was compelled to bound forward like the affrighted mountain goat, but after a quarter of a mile or so of such severe labor, he suddenly found himself upon the edge of an open and comparatively level prairie.

It looked a little more than a mile broad, while upon the opposite side the rough, rocky character of the country was resumed.

It struck the fugitive as favorable, and he instantly began speeding across it, while three Apaches—all of whom had ceased firing their guns—followed in close pursuit.

The great danger which Buck feared was, that some of his pursuers would fire, in which contingency he could scarcely hope to escape; but their actions showed that they were more anxious to secure him than to shoot him; and so long as there was a probability of it, they would not fire their guns.

When half the open space was passed, and Buck glanced over his shoulder, he found that there was but one savage who could begin to equal him in speed.

The other two had withdrawn entirely, and left it to their single companion to finish.

The trapper felt ashamed to flee from a single red-skin; but, he had an object to accomplish, and he kept down his speed for a short time.

As he sped along, he reached up and began unloosening his rifle, still fastened behind his shoulders.

It was rather difficult to do this, and maintain his high rate of speed at the same time; and while engaged in untying the fastening, unconsciously to himself, he had lost considerable ground.

The first warning he had of this state of the case, was by hearing the triumphant whoop of the Apache, who doubtlessly looked upon his flagging footsteps as evidence that he was exhausted, and would fall an easy prey.

With the suddenness of lightning, the trapper wheeled about and pointed his rifle straight at the savage.

The latter was startled at this unexpected apparition, and drew back his tomahawk to hurl it at his foe now turned at bay; but ere it left his hand, the gun was discharged, and the Apache, with a howling shriek, threw up his arms and fell dead.

The Apaches who had withdrawn from the chase witnessed this affair from a distance, and saw the fatal mistake they had committed in withdrawing from the chase at so early a stage.

Still hoping to accomplish something they resumed the pursuit, but in a few moments the fugitive vanished and they gave it up.

Knowing the persistency and cunning of the Apaches, Buck Buckram did not cease his running with the disappearance of the pursuers.

He had been in such business once before, and had come terribly near losing his life, from

acting upon the supposition that all danger was really over when it appeared to be.

He slackened his speed somewhat, but kept up a good gait, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure that none of his enemies were stealing a march upon him.

This manner of procedure he kept up for perhaps half an hour, when he came soon to a walk, muttering to himself at the same time:

"Sorry I hadn't time to stop and raise the ha'r of that red-skin, fur his impudence in folerin' me so close. Howsomever, I might have lost my own if I'd tried it."

He was now in a section as rough and uneven as any he had ever been in, and with considerable wood, so that it was a capital cover for enemies to maneuver against each other.

But there was no further necessity of playing hide-and-seek with the Apaches, and he had halted to consider upon a far different subject.

The afternoon was now well advanced, and it was evident that little could be done until the morrow; but he was not a man to hesitate or prove dilatory when he had decided upon a line of conduct.

"Now fur little Bess!" he exclaimed, "and may Buck Buckram never see his little one ag'in if he ever gives up afore he gits her."

CHAPTER XVIII.

LITTLE BESS.

THE flight and escape of Buck Buckram was a remarkable one, and such as a man does not often experience in a lifetime. Under the help of Providence, it was due mainly to its audacity, and the powerful nerve displayed by the trapper.

But here was one, for whom there was no possibility of escape—one in whom we have no little interest, and whose fortunes we have already followed.

Little Bess, as her companion prepared to charge out among her enemies, cheerily returned his good-by, and patiently awaited the issue of events. She had no suspicion of the artifice Buck had adopted, and little dreamed that when her two companions left the cavern, one of them was a dead man.

After the rush of the hunter there was an unusual stillness around the mouth of the cave for a few minutes. A number of Apaches had dashed away in pursuit, while the others appeared to be standing and staring in blank amazement at the scene.

Then came the crack of rifles, and the receding whoops of the pursuers, followed by a few moments more of quiet.

With the falling of the boulder at the entrance, there had been a great inward rush of smoke, so that the little prisoner assuredly would have perished, but for the "air-hole," which still stood her well in her time of need.

But a short time elapsed, when a peculiar noise was heard at the entrance. The smoke was too thick, and the effort too painful to the eyes, for Bess to tell what it meant; but it sounded to her as if some one was drawing the embers and coals away from the place, so as to admit him without danger.

Such proved to be the case, and shortly after Velasques dashed into the cavern, with a fearful imprecation.

"Bess! Bess! where are you! That dog hasn't run away with you, has he?"

He ran rapidly around, clutching and clawing the air, as though he expected to find her afloat in the heavy atmosphere.

"Bess, I say, why don't you speak to me?" he continued, choking and half-strangling.

The girl made no answer, she being shrewd enough to allow him to think she was either dead or nearly so, being assured that she would then receive good treatment.

"I'm afeard she's dead or run away with—"

At this instant he stumbled against her.

"Dead, I do believe—"

And then, catching up the limp form, he hurried out the cave into the open air.

Here he placed her upon the ground, saying as he did so:

"It's a wonder if she's alive, fur I couldn't stand it in that infarnal place fur five minutes longer."

Several Apaches had gathered around her, and discovered at once that animation had not been suspended. A little shaking and blowing in her face, and she began to gasp and struggle, as though still struggling with death. It was several minutes before she opened her fine blue eyes, and looking about her with a bewildered air, showed that she was herself again.

The moment it became certain that little Bess was really alive, the feelings of the half-breed appeared to undergo a change. His first pro-

eeding was to give her a ringing box upon the ears.

"What did you let 'em take you away fur? Why didn't you holler and yell, so that we might've knowed what they was at? I guess you didn't care much whether they took you or not."

And then followed another series of cuffs and blows, until the poor girl put up her hands to protect her ears, and cried with pain. Velasquies desisted for a while, apparently to the regret of the red-skins, who enjoyed any thing of the sort.

"If you ever play your father such a trick again, I'll kill you!" he savagely added, as he strode away.

It was on the point of Bessie's tongue to deny that he was her father, but she dared not, for fear of provoking him to greater anger.

She finally ventured to look around. Almost the first object that met her gaze was the figure of Dick Havens, some distance away, just as it lay after being cast down by Buck Buckram in his flight.

She stared in horror at it for a moment, and then gasped out the question:

"Is he dead?"

"Dead? In course he is. I shot him!" was the exulting reply of Velasquies, as he stood near, complacently viewing her.

Unable to repress her feelings, she burst into tears again, and covering her face, sobbed violently.

This so enraged her brutal master, that he walked up to where she sat, and cuffed her even more violently than before.

"Cry fur him, will yer? I'll give yer something to cry about. Begins to look as though yer run away yerself, instead of their takin' yer."

Had the unfeeling half-breed but known the truth, there is no telling what punishment he would have inflicted.

It was a pitiable scene, and had Buck Buckram been within range, nothing would have afforded him more pleasure than to have sent a bullet through the skull of the dastardly tyrant; and he would have done it without a moment's hesitation, even though he had to face a hundred deaths.

The death of Dick Havens was yet unavenged.

Little Bess saw nothing of the dead Apaches, as they had been carefully drawn away by their friends, and buried at a distance.

Those of the red-skins who did not join the pursuing party remained behind until they returned. When it was found that Buck Buckram really had escaped, the disappointment of the Apaches was fearful, and their shrieking and howling appalling.

They had already scalped the dead Havens, and by one impulse they rushed upon him again, kicking, cutting, striking and hammering so furiously, that they injured one another in their struggles.

When they finally desisted through sheer exhaustion, scarcely any semblance to humanity remained about what had once been the active, genial-natured Dick Havens.

He had been outraged beyond all power of description.

A number of Indians, as Buck Buckram expected would be done, continued the pursuit for a time, but it was finally given over, and the entire party collected in front of the cavern which had served as a refuge to the fugitives.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CAPTIVE AGAIN.

AFTER the Apaches had vented their childish rage and disappointment at the escape of Buck Buckram, they made preparations to leave the place, which had seen more of a failure than a success upon their part.

Before starting, all the furs and peltries were brought out from the cavern or *cache* and carried with them. Thus the labor of months was gone in a few moments.

The party moved toward the river where they entered their canoes, and started upstream, the direction from which they had come. The same Indian who had been with Velasquies, at the time of the escape of little Bess, still was with him, and the two, in company with the captive, entered a small boat together.

This savage was a full-blooded Apache, one of the most treacherous and malignant of his race. He and the half-breed came together, from union of disposition. They hunted and trapped with each other, and Damon and Pythias never were more intimate, and, apparently, more attached.

And yet, either of these precious scoundrels would have cut the throat of the other, had there been anything to gain by it. It was hardly likely that such companionship would continue for any length of time, without a rupture of some kind. The reason that it had not yet occurred, was simply because the occasion had not come.

The afternoon was waning when the Apaches moved up-stream in their canoes, and when they had gone a few miles, night descended upon them; but the same moon which had shone through a cloudless sky still beamed on them, and they were plainly discernible for a long distance from the shore.

Gradually as the party moved along, the small boat, containing the three individuals in whom we are most interested, fell behind the others. The latter, as a matter of course, observed it, but it was nothing to them. The half-breed accompanied them when he chose, and went alone when he so elected, without question.

The truth of it was that Velasquies was not willing to trust his prize among the unscrupulous savages. Bess was a girl of extraordinary beauty, was growing fast, and he had seen looks among the savages which alarmed him.

Many miles away, in the Hunter's Valley, the half-breed had a wife and numerous family, whom he occasionally visited, and who looked upon him with terror and loathing. When he made his appearance among them, it was to abuse and maltreat his family in a shameful manner. His own offspring fled in terror and hid themselves in the wood, while his wife had many a time run shrieking for her life, with the inhuman brute in furious pursuit. They had no friends to whom they could go, and were thus compelled to lead a life of misery and suffering, which it is impossible to realize or appreciate.

Velasquies had determined to take Bess to this home, and have her for a year or so, and then make her his wife. Here she would be safe, and not liable to run away, as she was old enough to understand that there was no possibility of her escaping the perils of the wood, should she attempt to reach the nearest settlement.

He had taken Bess to his miserable home years before, and his wife knew not where she came from, nor did she dare ask. She had been left there when too young to accompany him, but ever since she had attained any size, he had always taken her with him.

The wife of Velasquies, although the veriest slave, had once been a woman of beauty, and had been refined in her conversation and manners; and it was here that the girl had learned to talk in a manner which was a constant surprise to the trappers in whose company she was for a short time.

Unknown to either Buck Buckram or Velasquies himself, their two families were at no great distance from each other, and the trappers had many a time been within a few miles of the little girl without suspecting it.

It may well be supposed that had Bess known of the proximity of friends, she would have fled at midnight from the roof of her inhuman captor, and sought refuge with the chivalrous hunter, who would have defended her with his life.

The canoe of Velasquies was paddled by himself and the Apache, and, by a mutual understanding, they continued to fall further and further in the rear.

By-and-by the main party were scarcely visible, and then they vanished, and only the sound of the steady sweep of their paddles could be heard. Then these grew fainter and fainter, until they died out in the distance, and at last the trio were alone, leisurely pursuing their way up the lonely river.

Finally the rowing ceased altogether. The canoe floated some distance in perfect quiet, and Velasquies, with a single impulse of his paddle, sent it against the bank.

"Come, get out!" he called to Bess, who was drooping with sleep. She sprang nimbly out, and awaited on the shore his next commands.

The two followed her, and the canoe was then drawn up the bank. The Apache took some pains to hide it in the bushes, so that it would escape the casual observation of any one passing, and then, Velasquies leading the way, they strode rapidly through the woods, in a course which was at right angles to the stream.

The forest was familiar to the men, and they strode forward without hesitation, little Bess walking between them.

The distance, however, was short, when they reached a large, ~~savagely~~ oak, at the base of

which they began building a fire. It required but a few minutes for them to have a rearing, crackling blaze, which diffused a grateful warmth on this cool night.

Little Bess had tasted nothing for hours, and was nearly famished. She finally ventured to ask for something to eat, but was brutally told to "shut up."

As the night wore on she was given a blanket, but sleep did not visit her eyelids. She was thinking of one who had promised to come to her assistance, and who, at that moment was hunting through the woods for her.

CHAPTER XX.

A GOOD THING ALL AROUND.

LITTLE BESS found it impossible to sleep. A peculiar restlessness, rather singular in one so young, came over her shortly after she lay down; and although she lay quiet and motionless, yet she was as fully awake as when dragged from the cave by the half-breed.

The ravenous hunger had given place to a faint, sick feeling, which made the thought of food distasteful to her, although, could she have swallowed a few mouthfuls, it would have returned to her with greater force than ever.

As the night wore on, and the fire died down, the deep, regular breathing of Velasquies showed that he was wrapped in profound slumber, while the Apache sat with his knees drawn up, gazing fixedly into the fire, as though lost in reverie, unconscious of what was going on around him.

But the red-skin was sharply conscious, and his black, snake-like eyes flitted from one to the other, with a keen eagerness which showed that something more than usual engaged his thoughts.

He often looked at the half-breed, and then his eyes darted toward the form of Bess, who was all unaware of this scrutiny.

It must have been past midnight, when our heroine was startled by hearing a catlike tread, and raising her head, she saw the Apache approaching. Supposing the savage designed to kill her, she was about to scream, when he made a gesture which she understood to mean silence.

Terror alone kept her quiet, for she dreaded one of these as much as the other, and she knew that neither of them would hesitate to take the life of any person who stood in their way.

"Don't make noise!" he whispered, in broken English. "Me kill you! Keep still!"

Bess did not stir, and scarcely breathed.

The Apache now motioned for her to rise.

"He bad man!" said he, pointing to the sleeping Velasquies. "He hurt you; me take--won't hurt."

Bess did not dare to refuse, and yet she now feared the Indian more than the white man. She believed that he intended to steal her and take her to his home. She knew that if she resisted he would drive his knife to her heart, and she therefore rose meekly to her feet and awaited his orders.

With a hideous scowl he placed his face close to her own, and warned her again against making an outcry.

"Me kill you—make noise!"

"I won't," said the cowering child, speaking unconsciously in quite loud tones.

The Apache was silent a moment, gazing furtively around him. The half-breed moved uneasily in his sleep, as though about to wake. The Apache clutched his knife, and turned his head as quick as lightning. Had Velasquies wakened at that moment, the knife would instantly have been buried in his bosom; but he ceased his restless movements and slept on.

The wonder was that the red-skin did not slay his enemy at once, and so end the matter.

He stood motionless as a statue, looking at the unconscious form, and then, satisfied that all was right, he took the hand of the girl, and plunged into the wood.

He walked rapidly, taking the direction which led toward the river. As the distance was inconsiderable, it required but a short time to reach the stream, where, after a slight examination, the canoe was found precisely as it had been left.

But, singular as it may seem, Velasquies was not asleep, nor had he slept a wink since lying down. He had been shrewd enough to see, in the carefully studied actions of the Apache, a sinister design, and he had counterfeited unconsciousness for the purpose of ascertaining what the real intentions of the rascally Apache were.

It did not take him long to divine that his real purpose was to steal the girl from him, and as we have shown, he allowed him to do so.

And for his quiescence, during the stealthy movements of the Indian, he had several important reasons, the principal one of which was that, as he knew that the savage was an exceedingly fierce and dangerous character to encounter, he did not dare to provoke a collision with him, when the advantage upon each side would be equal. There was too strong a probability that he would come out second best in the little difficulty.

Another, and minor reason was, that he wished to justify his intended course in the eyes of Bess herself. If he should spring up suddenly and shoot the Apache, before he had committed any wrong against him, or before he had developed his intention of doing so, she might never believe there was ever any cause for such a summary proceeding.

So, as we have stated, he pretended to sleep, and did it so well that the wily red-skin was thrown completely off his guard. He waited until Bess and the latter had disappeared fairly in the wood, and then he rose silently to his feet, and followed with the celerity of a shadow.

He was certain, from the course of the Apache, that he was going for the canoe, in which he could rejoin his comrades without leaving a trail behind which any human eye could follow.

Without paying particular attention therefore to the precise course of the Indian's footsteps, the half-breed diverged somewhat to the right, taking a path more circuitous, but which would bring him to his destination almost, if not quite as soon.

His haste came near precipitating the very thing he was seeking to avoid. Unknown to him the savage had also turned in the same direction, and the first warning he had of the fact was in seeing the savage, still holding the girl by the hand, walking rapidly across a small opening, where both were plainly revealed in the moonlight.

The half-breed shrunk back and waited until they had passed out of sight again, and then he followed them more cautiously than before.

When the Apache drew the canoe out from the concealment, he signified to Bess to enter. She hesitated a moment, when he raised his glittering knife.

"Go quick! Me kill you!"

At that instant the Apache caught the click of a gun-lock behind him. Suspecting the truth, he turned about with the quickness of lightning, but he could see nothing.

He then turned again to spring into the canoe, when a sharp report rung out upon the night-air, and he uttered a shriek as the bullet passed through his heart. Still, true to his nature, when he realized that he had lost, he made an attempt to reach and slay Bess; but his strength failed, and he dropped lifeless, partly in the canoe and partly in the water.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BETTER THING ALL AROUND.

WHEN Bess heard the report of the gun, and saw the Apache fall, unfortunately she believed that Buck Buckram was at hand, and springing ashore, she ran in the direction of the sound, exclaiming:

"Where are you, Buck? I am so glad you have come! I knew you would not forget me."

"You did, eh?" was the response, as with a fearful blow he struck her almost senseless to the earth. "That's the thanks I git, is it, fur riskin' my life fur ye? You expected Buck Buckram, did ye? I only wish he would come!"

"Wal, by the living heavens! here he is, then!" exclaimed a voice, hoarse with passion, as the tall form of the trapper bounded through the wood and made straight for him.

The cowardly half-breed shrunk back helpless and appalled. The next instant he was in the gripe of the infuriated hunter, who made terribly short work with him.

"Here, my darling beaver, is Buck come, as he told you he would!" said the trapper, as he picked up the prostrate little one, and tenderly smoothed the hair away from her face.

Bess soon revived, and returned the caresses of her benefactor.

"Oh, where are they?" she asked, somewhat bewildered.

"They never can hurt you ag'in. Never mind about them now. You have seen too much of this business. Jist don't think about it now. Git in the canoe, and I'll take you home, where you'll be safe all the time."

She did as commanded, and seizing the paddle, Buck sent it rapidly down-stream, little Bess scarcely able to realize the astounding events which had passed before her so recently and so swiftly.

"Shoot me! it's like I allers does things!" he

muttered, as they paddled along. "I'm allers in too much of a hurry."

"What do you mean?" she asked, with some wonder.

"I had every thing fixed, jist how I could manage it, when I spilt it by gittin' so mad I couldn't wait."

She showed by her manner that she still failed to understand him.

"Wal, then, I meant to come onto that scamp rather sudden like, corner him up, and make him tell all he knowed about yer—whar he stole yer from—and all that; but when I see'd him hit yer—wal, what's the use?—I couldn't stand it no longer."

"Never mind, Buck; it'll all come right some time."

"In course; but I'm gittin' rather anxious 'bout it."

"You can wait if I can."

"I s'pose so; but I orter knowed better."

"Where are you going to take me now?"

"To my own home, whar yer'll stay till I find whar ye belong."

"And Dick Havens is dead," she repeated, her heart overflowing at the thought of what she had witnessed during the day.

"Yas, poor feller, he went under!" replied Buck, in a choking voice, as he worked harder than ever at the paddle.

"I saw him just after he was shot."

The trapper was silent awhile, then he related the particulars of his former companion's death to Bess, who, as may be supposed, was greatly surprised and shocked to learn the truth.

The girl had no wish or desire to sleep, but her craving for food came back to her, and she stated it to her companion.

"Hain't you had nothin' to eat?" he demanded, stopping his paddling, and looking her in the face.

"Nothing at all."

"Hang 'em!" he muttered. "Thar ain't but one critter that's worse than an Apache, and that's a half-breed."

He shied the canoe off to one side, and ran under the shadows of the trees along shore. Here he landed, and collecting a few dried sticks built a fire on a flat stone, which was placed in the stern of the canoe. The bright light, as all well know, is peculiarly attractive to fish, and in a few minutes a number of them were gathered around, and several of large size were plainly visible in the water below.

The trapper leaned over, and, carefully watching his opportunity, darted down his hand, and threw out a plump fellow upon the bottom of the canoe, where it floundered and glistened in the moonlight.

"Now we shall soon have a supper," said he, as he transferred several burning brands to the shore, and building a larger fire, began cooking the fish over it, first cleaning it and then spreading it out like a fan upon a pronged stick.

It required but a few minutes for him to cook it nicely, and Bess made one of the best meals she ever ate.

This done, she lay down in the canoe, and Buck laid one of the shawls, which he had stripped from the half-breed and Apache, over her, and told her to sleep.

It was yet early in the evening, but Bess never opened her eyes until broad daylight, and then she saw the trapper preparing to start down-stream.

He had improved the few leisure moments in catching and cooking some more fish, so that he had a breakfast prepared, and enough to last them through the day.

He had done something else during the night, of which Bess never knew anything. They were within the immediate vicinity of the cave, which had been the scene of the siege, and first securing the girl some distance from the shore, where he felt it would be safe to leave her awhile, he repaired to the cavern, to see what had become of the body of his comrade.

He found the mutilated remains, and with his own hands, tenderly lifted and carried it some distance away, where he buried it in a cleft of rocks, and covered it with rocks and stones, so that it could not be disturbed by wild animals.

This act of humanity and friendship completed, he returned to the cave and explored the interior, faintly hoping that the red-skins might have overlooked his pelties.

But they had not; not a single fur remained. But thanking Heaven for his own marvelous escape, he hastened back to where his precious charge lay sleeping.

After Bess awoke, they shoved away from shore, and resumed their homeward journey,

which was continued with scarcely any intermission until sunset.

During the afternoon, they entered a much larger stream, and Buck Buckram announced that they had but a short distance further to go by water.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEST THING ALL AROUND.

THE following morning, which was a beautiful sunshiny one, as they were paddling along in the canoe, Bess remarked:

"I have been here before."

"When?"

"With Velasques; this is the way he went home."

"Cur'us we never met each other; fur when I'm trappin' it's the way I ginerally take."

By-and-by they landed. Buck pulled the canoe up the bank, and hid it under a thick clump of bushes. Bess watched him curiously a few moments, and then said:

"It wasn't far from this place that he used to land."

"That's cur'ouser yit. Qua'r ef our shanties ain't fur from each other. Shoot me!" exclaimed the trapper, suddenly stopping and slapping his thigh, "ef I don't b'lieve I know whar his place is—that is, his fam'ly. He's an Injun wife off a good ways from hyar."

And then Buck proceeded to describe a miserable hut which he had occasionally passed in his travels, and which he now believed to be the one belonging to the family of the half-breed.

Such proved to be the case—Bess readily recognizing it from his description, and there was great wonder expressed by both, to think that they had been so near each other, for so long a time, without ever suspecting it.

"How far do you live from here?" she asked, as they walked briskly along.

"Not a great ways," was his reply. "We'll reach thar long before sundown."

The sun had barely crossed the meridian, when the two entered a small clearing, in the center of which stood a tidy-looking cabin, while several children were playing around the outside.

The face of Buck Buckram was lit up with a smile, as the little ones ran forward to meet him, and he caught them in his arms and kissed them over and over again. The next moment a buxom-looking woman came forth, and was folded in his arms, while the faces of all were lit up with happiness.

In a few words, the trapper explained the facts regarding the little stranger he had brought, and she was at once received as a friend and daughter. Three little girls, varying from four to twelve years, were frolicking around the house, and making glad the hearts of their parents. The third, a boy named Kit, after the renowned Kit Carson, an old friend of the hunter's, was off on a hunt, and was not expected back until nightfall.

It was a touching picture—the trapper's home. Here he was surrounded by those he loved best of all upon the earth, and here only was he ever happy. Like the celebrated scout Carson, he was a model husband and father, but the roving disposition which he had formed in his youth, controlled him through life, and after a short stay at home, he generally went forth again to engage in the perilous duty of hunting and trapping.

His extraordinary skill in these pursuits had been rewarded, and he had accumulated quite a moderate competence—so much so, that he now felt at liberty to carry out the pledge he had made his wife some years before, of removing to Santa Fe and engaging in some less perilous business.

"Only one thing yet to finish," said he, as his wife sat on his knee, while the children frolicked around the floor.

"What's that?"

"I must find out the home of little Bess. I never could rest easy till that was settled. Do you know, Alfrina, that I've an idea that I've seen this little one somewhere before?"

"So you have; I remember your speaking of her. Wait a moment," said she, turning toward their guest. "See here, Bess."

The girl looked up at her.

"Your name is not Bess. Now listen, and tell me whether you ever heard the name—ALFRINA—the same as my own."

The little one started as if she had been stung by something, and then she stood several minutes wrapped in a reverie so deep, that she was unconscious of what was going on around her.

Finally she raised her head, and said:

"That's my name!"

It would be impossible to depict the interest that shone in the face of the trapper and his wife at this avowal.

The wife now turned toward her husband, and said:

"Don't you remember, ten years ago, when you came home one day, and told me what a beautiful baby you had seen, and that it had the same name as myself?"

"What else?" asked the hunter, whose memory evidently was not equal to that of his better half. "Where was it I see'd her?"

"In Santa Fe. She was in a child's carriage in the street, and as she was about the same age as our Alfrina, and was a beautiful child, you took particular notice of her."

Buck's eyes now sparkled. It had all come back to him.

"Yes, I remember it. Shoot me! what a fool I was that I didn't think of it before! Yes, I remember it well; but I don't know what other name she had, or who she belonged to."

"You can find them, I suppose."

"If hunting to the ends of the earth will do it, I shall," was the determined reply of the trapper.

The wife now went to Alfrina (for she is no longer Bess), and endeavored to follow up the questions she had begun with, and by which she had succeeded in partly awaking her train of remembrance.

"Do you remember who called you Alfrina?"

Again the little head was bent, and a look of perplexity settled upon her countenance for full five minutes. Then she raised her gaze, and with inexpressible tenderness, repeated the single word:

"Mother!"

"Where? When?" were the eager queries, which followed this reply.

The girl tried as hard as before to think, but her mind wandered; it was a fruitless effort.

"I cannot tell. I can sometimes see a beautiful house, with brothers and sisters all around me; but then it is all gone again. Oh! I cannot think; I have tried hard often before."

"That's so," assented Buck. "I've pumped and questioned her till she wasn't able to stand. Let the gal alone till after dinner."

A good, old-fashioned meal was prepared, and the family gathered around it. There was some disappointment at the absence of Kit, but, as he could hardly be looked for until nightfall, there was no anxiety about him. He was old enough and skilled enough to take care of himself in the woods, and was not unfrequently absent for several days at a time.

Just as night was closing in, Kit returned. He was a large, strapping, rosy-cheeked boy, cheerful and full of spirits, and as rollicking and jovial as his sisters, running over with joy at the return of his father.

Kit was laden down with game, for he was a worthy son of such a hunter as Buck Buckram.

After the congratulations were over, Kit gave an account of the hunt upon which he had been engaged. All his game had been bagged during the afternoon.

"What were you doing this morning?" inquired his mother.

"Helping a poor family get off to Santa Fe. They wanted a little help at starting: that's all."

"You didn't allow them to go alone?" demanded the mother, in amazement, while the eyes of the father seconded the question.

"Oh, no! There were two friends—hunters—that agreed to see them into Santa Fe. They were in a great hurry to get off, as they were afraid that the wife's husband would get back and stop her. He must have been a great husband, I think."

Further inquiry elicited the fact that Kit had helped off the wife and children of Velasques, the half-breed, she having been persuaded by several friends to go to Santa Fe to escape his brutality.

On the morrow Buck Buckram bade his family and Alfrina good-by, for a time, while he went to Santa Fe to endeavor to gain traces of her friends. He expected to be back in the course of a week, although, as a matter of course, he had gone upon a very uncertain undertaking.

Little Bess, as we may call her for a time, immediately became a favorite with those left behind. Kit had a number of traps in the surrounding woods, which he set, and although game was quite scarce, he occasionally met with success. Little Bess was taken with him on his rambles, for the purpose of instructing her in the profession; but it was found that she knew as much as he did, if not more. She had been taught trapping among the Indians, and

had displayed such skill and met with such success, that the Apaches called her *Bache Tanamas*, the *Female Trapper*.

She set their traps, and on the succeeding morning, each of them contained a beaver, while there was not one in the others. Singular as it may seem, this operation was repeated night after night in succession, until it came to be believed that she had some secret by which she attracted the timid and sagacious animals.

In the meantime, Buck Buckram was prosecuting his inquiries with a perseverance and vigor that could scarcely fail of success.

After reaching Santa Fe, he was at loss, for a time, as to the best course to pursue. He was now able to recall distinctly the circumstance to which his wife referred.

When his eldest daughter was just beginning to walk, he was passing leisurely through the streets of Santa Fe, when he met a small Mexican child's carriage, in charge of a female servant, and a girl seated within of such remarkable beauty, that he paused and gazed at it in admiration. He inquired its name, and asked the privilege of kissing it. Both requests were granted, and he placed his grizzled beard and scarred face against the peachy lips of the infant. He learned that its name was Alfrina, but the latter name escaped him or was forgotten; and, as it was, he never would have recalled the other, had it not been the same as his wife's, and had she not first mentioned it.

As the best that could be done, he sought out the family of Velasques, and made inquiries of the half-breed's wife. She could tell him nothing, except that her husband had brought her there, when an infant, and had never revealed a word regarding her.

She then asked in such a terrified manner whether he knew anything regarding her husband, that he told her he had seen him killed in an affray. The relief with which this sad tidings was received by his wife, was touching and strange, and satisfied the trapper that, had she known the full circumstances, she would have looked upon him in no other light than that of benefactor.

He had turned to leave, when she called him back.

"I once heard him speak of a wealthy Mexican named Jarilla, who had done him some injury, and he said that he had made himself equal with him. He never referred to it afterward, but I sometimes imagined that it was his child that he brought to our house."

"Like enough," was the comment of Buck, as he walked away.

He repeated the name over and over to himself, to see if there was anything familiar about it; but he could not remember ever to have heard it before. However, he clung to the fancy that he was on the right track, and determined to make search for a family of that name.

Here, again, he was puzzled, for diligent inquiry failed to reveal any one of that name.

But good-fortune came to him in a shape which he least expected. A half-hour afterward he encountered Kit Carson in the street. The latter individual had just been appointed Indian agent, and was in good spirits.

The two old friends shook hands, and had quite a chat.

"What are you doing now, Buck?" asked Carson.

The particulars of little Bess's history was quickly related, and he said at the conclusion:

"Jist now I'm looking for a man named Jarilla; and ef anyone can put me on the track, I think you're the man."

The Indian agent bent his head a few minutes in thought, and then looked up with a bright look so characteristic of him.

"I know him."

"Where is he?"

"He has a hacienda not far from my home in Taos. He is one of the wealthiest Mexicans in the country, and one of the best men I ever knowed."

"Are you well acquainted with him?"

"Not jist now; but I knowed him well ten years ago. Yes, Buck, you're on the right track!" exclaimed Kit, in considerable excitement, and with no little pleasure.

Buck asked him to explain.

"Ten years ago he came to me, and wanted me to hunt a child of his, that he thought had been carried away by a party of Apaches that had been through the country near his hacienda some time before. He offered me ten thousand dollars if I would bring her back."

"Did you undertake it?"

"Yes; I followed the Apaches for over two hundred miles, but there was a mistake made.

They hadn't taken her, and I came back no wiser than I went. He paid me a thousand dollars, and looked more like a heart-broken man than anybody I had ever seen."

"Of course he was mistaken, for she was stole by a scamp of a half-breed, of the name of Velasques."

"The dog! And he was one of the most active men in the search. Jarilla never suspected him, although I knew the half-breed had a grudge against his employer, because he detected him in and prevented his cheating a man that he was trading horses with. Queer that I didn't have my eyes opened."

Satisfied that he was now upon the right trail, Buck bade Kit Carson good-by, and mounting his mustang, made all haste to Taos. He knew very well where the residence of Carson was, and after some inquiry, he was directed to the hacienda of Senor Jarilla.

It was just at nightfall that Buck rode into the lane or road leading to the house, and gave his animal in charge to a servant who was waiting.

The trapper had little respect for and fear of rank, and he asked at once to see Senor Jarilla.

"Your name, please," inquired the servant, with great obsequiousness.

"Oh git out! Never mind my name! I want to see him mighty quick, or I'll bust the door down."

This was said in poor English and still poorer Spanish. The *creando* understood him, however, and a few minutes later Buck Buckram was ushered into the presence of a middle-aged gentleman, with very gray hair, who showed the gentleman in every movement, and in the expression of his face.

He inquired after the trapper's health, offered him wine, and made him perfectly at home, before he gave him time to hint at his errand.

Buck was a little puzzled to decide how to introduce the matter, but he concluded to do it without any circumlocution, and in the most direct manner possible.

We will not attempt to describe the scene which followed, when Senora Jarilla was called into the room, and the astounding truth made known to her. We leave it to the imagination of the reader.

Two days later, "Little Bess,"—Alfrina Jarilla—bade her friends good-by, and mounted on the mustang in front of Buck Buckram, rode to Taos, and then to the hacienda of Senor Jarilla, where she was placed in the arms of her parents, who were nearly beside themselves with joy.

During the interview, Buck Buckram stepped away unobserved. A few weeks later, he and his family removed to Santa Fe.

They had been here but a short time, when Senor Jarilla called upon him, and insisted that he should take the ten thousand dollars which had been offered ten years before, for the recovery of his daughter.

The old trapper resolutely refused to take one cent, although he was urged in the strongest manner.

"You will then accept a present from Alfrina?"

"Wal, I s'pose so," was the hesitating answer, as he suspected this was a subterfuge to get round the same thing.

The present consisted of a handsome residence in Santa Fe, furnished in admirable style, a magnificent horse to Buck and one to his son, and a splendid wardrobe to the wife and children.

The old trapper attempted to resist, but in vain.

The friendship between Kit Buckram and Senorita Alfrina grew with their years until it ripened into love, and the father was as proud when the two were united as though his daughter had married the emperor of Mexico.

THE END.

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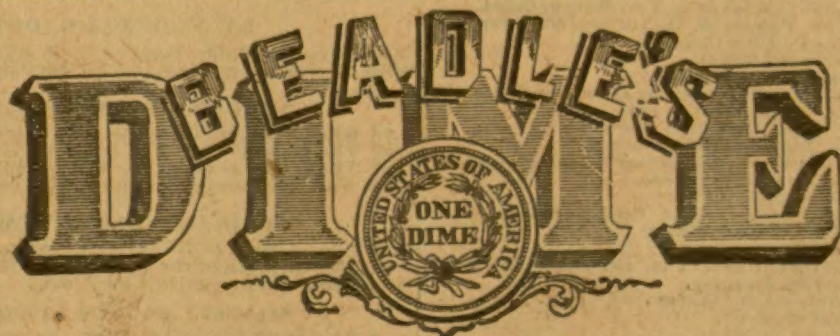
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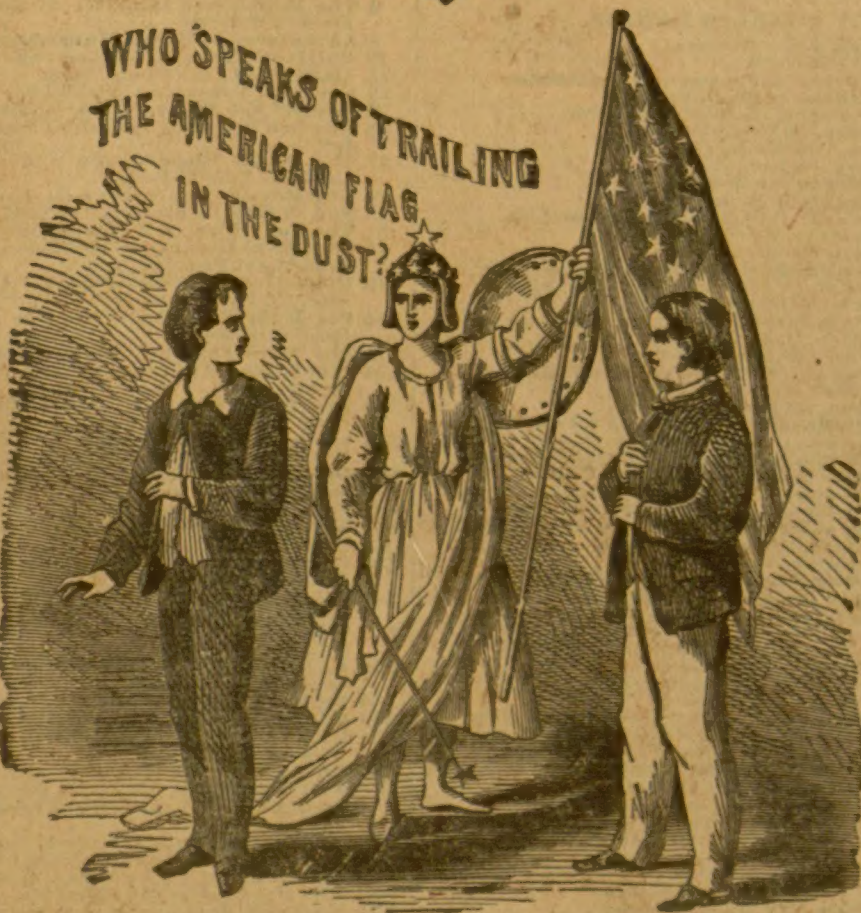
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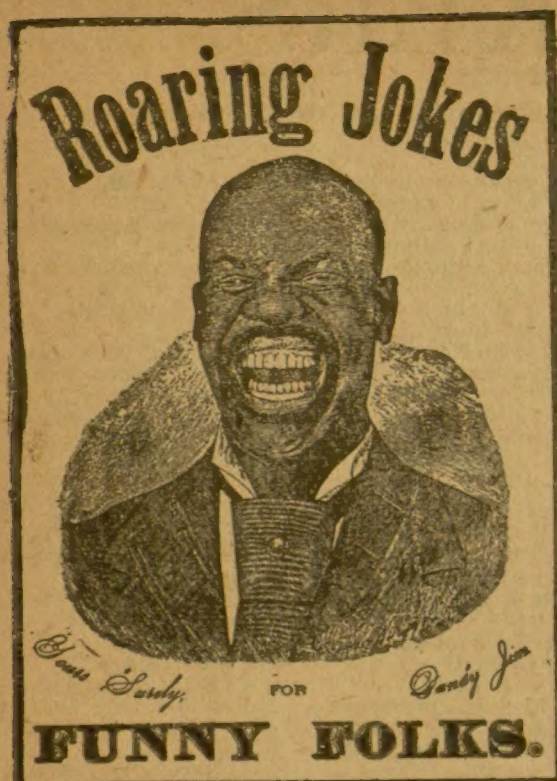
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